

The **POETICS** of
NORMAN MAILER'S NONFICTION

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The **POETICS** of
NORMAN MAILER'S NONFICTION

Self-Reflexivity, Literary Form, and
the Rhetoric of Narrative



Tampere Studies in Literature and Textuality

Series Editor: Pekka Tammi, University of Tampere
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Aidilleni.

Introduction

It's a peculiar form of non-fiction;
a special species of non-fiction;
a form of its own somewhere between fiction and non-fiction.
– Norman Mailer: *Oswald's Tale* (OT 353)

In its creative shaping of factual material into literary art, Norman Mailer's work represents a third mode between the conventional categories of fiction and nonfiction. My thesis proposes that Mailer's self-reflexive play with literary forms, genres, and conventions constitutes a complex intratextual and intertextual framework, which needs to be taken into account when we consider the "peculiar" effects that characterize his literary nonfiction. It is my contention that in discussing the complexities of self-reflexivity, literary form, and the rhetoric of narrative in nonfiction we cannot rely on binary distinctions between fact and fiction any more than we could leap into a "panfictionalism" which would blur and merge these distinctions for good. Rather, we should trace "a careful path across a wide, uncharted territory" (Heyne 2001: 332). Individual narratives have their specific rhetorical techniques and aims and, consequently, particular ethical and emotional effects on their readers and audiences. However, instead of merely delineating these specific means and particular effects in individual texts, we need a systematic theory (poetics) for tracing the uncharted territory in the first place. My study, then, will attempt to place *Mailer's nonfiction* into a reflexive, reciprocal, and rhetorical relationship with *the theory of literary nonfiction*, while also examining the relationship between *authors, texts, readers, and subjects* belonging to "the actual world," the central world in the theory of possible worlds.

Probing a Poetics of Nonfiction

According to the classical task of structuralist poetics, the role of a “poetician” is to classify general literary structures rather than merely analyze particular narratives. Poetics is a study of literature which attempts to understand what makes literature possible, seeking to define the general conditions of literary form and meaning. Thus, the main object of poetics is not an individual text but literature as a larger system and as general laws of which a particular text is the product (see Todorov 1981: 6).¹ On the one hand, poetics is a discipline that regards literature as the art of language produced in the creative activity of poiesis; on the other hand, poetics is a cognitive activity governed by the general requirements of scientific inquiry (e.g., Doležel 1990: 4). Without a larger poetic system, particular texts, Mailer’s narratives in this case, may remain “anomalies” without a distinct form and vision of their own. However, by placing those narratives in the context of various literary conventions and traditions, the poetics-based reading proposed in this study can shed a new light on the complex literary form of Mailer’s nonfiction. Therefore I still find much value in the traditional stance taken by Jonathan Culler in his *Structuralist Poetics*: “A work has a structure only in terms of a theory which specifies the ways in which it functions, and to formulate that theory is the task of poetics” (1975: 109). Mailer’s works can be profitably assessed and clarified on the basis of some general model, but eventually, as all innovative and experimental literary texts, they may check, redefine, and modify that model.² In the sections below, my aim is to delineate literary aspects in Mailer’s nonfiction and introduce the theoretical approaches and methodological tools of this thesis.

¹ Likewise, in the tradition of Prague structuralism, according to Lubomír Doležel, “poetics encompassed both a theoretical (universalist) poetics, one that designs *universal* tools (concepts, models, methods), and an analytical (particularist) poetics, one that tests the universal tools in the analysis of *particular* literary phenomena” (2000: 646).

² Poetics has historically cultivated a logical and epistemological continuity by “constantly reexamining its conceptual system and its methodological principles” (Doležel 1990: 5). The poetics of nonfiction would be one more territory to be explored by poetics. From the viewpoint of a rhetorical theory of narrative, emphasizing the dynamics of reading, we may construct a “recursive relationship” between a narrative text and a general theory, and approach “the narrative through the lenses provided by theory but remaining open to ways in which the narrative requires revisions of the theory that may in turn provide further illumination of the narrative” (Phelan & Martin 1999: 88).

The Literary and Novelistic Form of Nonfiction

My special focus in this study is the complex poetic, pragmatic, and rhetorical problematics suggested by Norman Mailer's *self-reflexive literary nonfiction*, its style and structure, and its ways of communicating with its reader/audience. When proposing, in the following pages, a certain poetics of literary nonfiction, my main aim is to connect this theoretical discussion to the individual poetics of Mailer's work. It is also in this sense that Mailer emerges as one of the participants in the critical discussion through both his *explicit* and *implicit* reflection upon these matters.³ This is to say that my approach to the theory of literary nonfiction is partly created by Mailer's nonfictional practice. The term and concept I propose to use here, 'literary nonfiction,' is to be understood as a reflexive notion, and it can be attached to certain kinds of literary narrative which base their rhetoric and representation on factual and documentary ground.⁴ In my view, nonfiction implicitly poses poetic, pragmatic, rhetorical, and ethical questions at least partially distinct from those of fiction.

³ Mailer's discussion of fictional and nonfictional poetics has often appeared both "inside" his narratives and "outside" of them (e.g., in non-literary texts, interviews, etc.). We may consequently call these theoretical reflections *implicit* and *explicit*, respectively (cf. Hutcheon 1988: 13; Wesseling 1991: 82). However, we need to take care not to merge these two levels of reflection into one, for even in nonfictional narratives implicit reflection – as constructed by the *implied* author – does not always directly correspond to the explicit reflection on those same narratives provided by the *actual*, or flesh-and-blood writer. We may note that even forewords, afterwords, and "author's notes" in Mailer's books are non-narrative *paratexts* belonging to the level of explicit reflection, like the author's notion that *The Executioner's Song* is "a factual account" of the Gary Gilmore case (ES 1051). The most famous explicit reflection in the framework of the poetics of nonfiction appears to be Capote's coinage of the term 'nonfiction novel' for his *In Cold Blood*, a work which seemingly lacks strong *implicit* reflection upon its alleged nonfictionality.

⁴ Obviously, the term 'nonfiction' is often, at least in the context of fiction studies, used as a negative term, connoting (among other things) *non-literary* texts: legal, scientific, journalistic, etc. Gérard Genette, for example, prefers the term '*factual narrative*' "so as to avoid depending systematically on negative expressions (*nonfiction*, *nonfictional*)" (1993 [1991]: 55n). Lubomír Doležel similarly prefers 'factual narrative' to such variants as 'nonfiction novel' or 'literature of fact' (see 1999: 267). Compare also John Hartsock, who prefers 'literary journalism' to 'literary nonfiction' because "to define the form as a 'nonfiction' reinscribes its status as a 'nought'" (2000: 12). However, while both the terms 'non-fiction' (with a hyphen) and 'factual narrative' are usable when marking the distinction of these discourses from *fictional* narrative, I shall use the term '*nonfiction*' (without a hyphen) to designate a "generic" mode of writing. Nor do I restrict nonfiction to *journalism*. As I will suggest, 'nonfiction' has become a more or less problematic genre-concept characterizing the distinct type of American writing, like the new journalism or the nonfiction novel of the sixties and seventies.

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‘Literary nonfiction’ may sound like a complicated concept, but it has been found useful for it “conveys the hybrid nature of the texts [we study] and thus their paradoxical, threshold, problematic nature” (Anderson 1989: ix).⁵ There is, of course, a large body of theoretical and critical work on such nonfiction which is regarded, from different angles and viewpoints, as more or less novelistic, narrative, literary, and creative. Some of this theoretical work, especially American studies (my main concern here), still emphasizes the complex genre or mode of nonfiction as deriving, in particular, from the New Journalism of the sixties, especially from the reportage of Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote’s famous coinage of “the nonfiction novel” in *In Cold Blood*, and Mailer’s several experiments with the form.⁶ This mode of writing is characterized, for example, by John Hellmann in his *Fables of Fact*: “The terms of ‘new journalism’ and ‘nonfiction novel’ both serve as names for a contemporary genre in which journalistic material is presented in the forms of fiction” (1981: 1). This kind of simple, rather unproblematic genre

⁵ ‘Literary nonfiction’ is, actually, only one of the fluid and arguable terms used to characterize such writing which foregrounds both its poetic and referential aspects. In Barbara Lounsberry’s words, the form (whatever it is) remains “the great unexplored territory of contemporary criticism” (1990: xi). As Ross Winterowd sees it, “the greatest problem, perhaps, is finding a term that covers the texts I deal with,” and a sign of his frustration may be that he finally adopts the concept of “‘other’ literature” (1990: ix; my emphasis). Compare also the following reflection: “So, what is this genre of writing, variously called Personal Journalism, Literary Journalism, Dramatic Nonfiction, the New Journalism, Parajournalism, Literary Nonfiction, the New Nonfiction, Verity, the Nonfiction Novel, the Literature of Fact, the Literature of Reality, and – the name we know best – Creative Nonfiction?” (Cheney 2001: 1). The reason why the term ‘creative nonfiction’ is here associated with the most popular usage is apparently the existence of the magazine *Creative Nonfiction*, which includes both literary criticism and creative writing. Nevertheless, in my opinion, ‘creative’ designates something more imaginative and fictive than ‘literary,’ which should not be simply conflated with fictionality. Another common term, ‘the nonfiction novel,’ also sounds problematical because ‘the novel’ arguably connotes fictionality more strongly than the adjective ‘literary’ does. Various other concepts (art-journalism, essay-fiction, factual fiction, journalistic nonfiction, faction, narrative nonfiction, artful literary nonfiction, and non-imaginative literature) have also been proposed (see Weber 1980: 1; Lounsberry 1990: xi; Winterowd 1990: ix; Hartssock 2000: 4-5). We may even note (and perhaps dispense with) the concept ‘nonfiction *fiction*’ as proposed by Lars Ole Sauerberg (2001: 99-100). Furthermore, while Mailer’s nonfictional works often self-reflexively refer to themselves as kinds of “novels,” they may simultaneously deny being (fictive) novels; therefore, I will refer to Mailer’s book-length literary nonfictions as simply “books.”

⁶ The main book-length studies in this field of defining, characterizing and analyzing literary nonfiction and its variants (like the new journalism, literary journalism, and the nonfiction novel) in the American context have been Zavarzadeh, *The Mythopoeic Reality: The Postwar American Nonfiction Novel* (1976), Hollowell, *Fact & Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel* (1977), Weber, *The Literature of Fact: Literary Nonfiction in American Writing* (1980), Hellmann, *Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction* (1981), Smart, *The Nonfiction Novel* (1985), Fishkin, *From*

definition will no longer suffice. My study will chart the form of literary nonfiction in more complex ways, problematizing its seemingly too direct connections to fiction.

As Eric Heyne notes in his seminal essay “Toward a Theory of Literary Nonfiction,” there has been much confusion about theoretical issues concerning the distinction between fact and fiction, the qualities of literary status in nonfiction, and the responsibilities of the author in turning history into art. Criticizing simple-minded definitions of artistic nonfiction based on the use of techniques common in fiction, Heyne writes that “literary nonfiction and fiction are fundamentally different, despite their resemblances in structure or technique, and this difference must be recognized by any theory that hopes to do justice to powerful nonfiction narratives” (1987: 480). Barbara Lounsberry argues, albeit rather rigidly, that the “proper” stuff of nonfiction is documentable subject matter chosen from the real world as opposed to the writer’s inventions (see 1990: xiii; cf. Lehman 1997: 17). As another critic suggests, literary journalism/nonfiction can be defined as a prose form whose verifiable content is shaped and transformed into a story by use of narrative and rhetorical techniques generally associated with fiction (see Connery 1992: xiv). And John Hartsock, proposing “a working definition,” discusses literary journalism/nonfiction as a body of writing which “reads like a novel or short story except that it is true or makes a truth claim to phenomenal experience” (2000: 1). Although the conventional connections of literary nonfiction with the new journalistic basis have been criticized by, among others, John Russell, in the framework of my study focusing on Mailer’s nonfictional practice I do not find it useful

Fact to Fiction: Journalism & Imaginative Writing in America (1985), Anderson, *Style as Argument: Contemporary American Nonfiction* (1987), Lounsberry, *The Art of Fact: Contemporary Artists of Nonfiction* (1990), Winterowd, *The Rhetoric of “Other” Literature* (1990), Small, *Literary Selves: Autobiography and Contemporary American Nonfiction* (1993), Frus, *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative* (1994), Lehman, *Matters of Fact: Reading Nonfiction Over the Edge* (1997), Russell, *Reciprocities in the Nonfiction Novel* (2000), and Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (2000). See also collections such as Wolfe & Johnson (eds.), *The New Journalism* (1973), Weber (ed.), *The Reporter as Artist: A Look at the New Journalism Controversy* (1974), Anderson (ed.), *Literary Nonfiction: Theory, Criticism, Pedagogy* (1989), Sims (ed.), *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century* (1990), Connery (ed.), *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism: Representative Writers in an Emerging Genre* (1992), Sims & Kramer (eds.), *Literary Journalism* (1995), and Karrane & Yagoda (eds.), *The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism* (1997). Of individual articles, seminal ones are Heyne, “Toward a Theory of Literary Nonfiction” (1987) and McCord Frus, “The Ideology of the Form: The Nonfiction Novel” (1986). Notable examples among journals and magazines concentrating on nonfiction criticism are *Creative Nonfiction*, *Fourth Genre*, and *River Teeth: A Journal of Nonfiction Narrative*.

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to follow Russell's rather idiosyncratic genre definitions.⁷ When discussing contemporary American nonfiction Chris Anderson does not aim at defining any genre as such, but concentrates on the question of style and rhetoric as they are revealed in individual works of nonfiction artists. Thus his attempt is "not arguing in the abstract for the value of the genre but dramatizing that value through concrete, inductive readings of actual texts" (1987: 4). Daniel Lehman believes that "our minds are capable of comprehending a blurred genre status as the reader negotiates texts"; he adds: "[U]ltimately I am much more interested in concentrating on the relationships among author, written text, reader, and character in nonfictional texts (and some texts normally classified as fictional) than I am in determining their generic status with precision" (1997: 23). This pursuit of "precision" in defining the generic status of literary nonfiction, as suggested by Heyne (1987: 484), becomes more complicated when we recognize the various ways by which both authors and readers "implicate" themselves in narratives that purport to say something significant about our public realities and shared histories.

The question of *literary form* in nonfiction is especially complicated if we maintain the traditional connection between literature and fiction. As it has often been suggested, words like *narrative*, *fiction*, and *literature* are used in a bewildering variety of ways, and sometimes they are too easily used as synonyms without further theoretical reflection, making 'fiction' designate all texts that take literary or narrative form (see Roberts 1972: 1; Schmidt 1976: 161; Cohn 1999: 40; Herman 2002: 369, 417n).⁸ However, according to the pragmatics of speech-act theory, some works of fiction are literary works, but not all works of literature are fictional. In John Searle's

⁷ Russell would like to construct a clear division between what he labels 'nonfiction novel' and 'literary journalism,' because for him journalistic writing is separate from the novel as a genre (see 2000: 1-25). His notion of a nonfiction novel is quite broad and embraces a variety of examples such as Isak Dinesen's [Karen Blixen's] *Out of Africa*, e.e. cummings's *The Enormous Room*, Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* as well as narratives by Primo Levi. While there is an attempt to discuss 'literary nonfiction' or 'the nonfiction novel' as a *genre* in both Russell's and some other theorists' discourse, I do not see these various works of literary nonfiction forming a genre in any clear sense. Rather, these works (especially those by Capote, Didion, Mailer, Thompson, and Wolfe in my scheme) exemplify a distinct *mode* of writing developed in the period of American "postmodernism" in the 1960s and 1970s. Instead of using the concept of "genre," some critics of literary journalism/nonfiction adopt "the more conservative usage of 'form,'" implying that "our understanding of it is still very much emerging" (Hartsock 2000: 3).

⁸ It has, then, been regarded as problematic from a philosophical perspective that modern literary theory so widely works according to the premise "as if 'fiction' was synonymous with 'prose literature,'" and as if the definition of fiction and the definition of literature were one and the same thing," and consequently "[t]o write as if the definition of literature is the same thing as the definition of fiction constitutes a serious theoretical failure" (Olsen 1987: 158, 159; cf. Searle 1979 [1975]: 59).

words, “[Capote’s] *In Cold Blood* and [Mailer’s] *Armies of the Night* qualify as literature but are not fictional” (1979 [1975]: 58). As Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen argue in their central work *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, narrative, fiction and literature are separate concepts. Thus “narrative *per se* is merely a formal feature of a text without referential or ontological implications,” and “‘fiction’ is a descriptive concept while ‘literature’ is an evaluative concept” (1994: 224, 255). In this sense, *the literary* is an aesthetic category, whereas *the fictional* is a semantic one. In her listing of all possible combinations based on the tripartite (non)fiction-narrative-literature scheme, Marie-Laure Ryan sees *literary narrative fiction* as only one category among others. Accordingly, she also includes *literary narrative nonfiction* (which is my main concern here) and such variants, for example, as *nonliterary nonnarrative fiction* and *nonliterary nonnarrative nonfiction* (which is *not* my main concern here). ‘Literary narrative nonfiction’ reasonably comprises, for example, “works of autobiography and history acknowledged as literature” (Ryan 1991: 1). However, Ryan gives rather obscure examples of nonfiction in her thesis, mainly connecting the type of “nonfiction novel” with the somewhat blurred concept of “true fiction.”⁹

On making a clear semantic distinction between the concepts of literary and fictional, we may see how “the quality of literariness spills out into nonfiction realms” (Reed 1992: 4). Of course, the term ‘literariness,’ as adopted by the Russian formalists, designates the quality of works that draw attention to themselves as language, rather than presenting themselves as transparent reflections of reality. We need to reflect more closely in the following pages upon whether there is, in fact, a clear distinction between fictional and nonfictional making or shaping when it comes to producing literary works with aesthetic merit. While there are certain distinct practices and aims between fiction and nonfiction, such as pragmatic and referential aspects, this does not necessarily mean that all nonfiction is less “poetic” than all fiction. As Roman Jakobson famously emphasizes, the *poetic function* is not the only function of literary texts but it is their “dominant” func-

⁹ Compare Ryan: “True fiction includes such mimetic practices as dramatized history, romanced biographies, and what has paradoxically come to be known as ‘nonfiction novels,’ i.e., stories about true facts that use the techniques of narrative fiction” (1991: 33-34). Ryan (like other possible worlds theorists) usually bases her arguments upon rather sweeping generalizations, speaking for example of “*the undocumented facts* of romanced lives, dramatized history, and nonfiction novels” (ibid.: 35; my emphasis). There is not as much distinction between textual modes made here as one would expect from an anti-panfictionalist like Ryan. To be exact, despite the valuable suggestions provided by literary semantics, pragmatics, and possible-worlds theory, there is still much room for the more defined poetics of literary nonfiction or the “nonfiction novel.”

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tion; this means that the “message” foregrounds itself, drawing attention to its formal aspects (especially in poetry which “thickens” language by emphasizing sound, rhythm, and image) (e.g., Scholes 1974: 26). In this way the poetic function draws the attention away from the message’s *referential function*, which is oriented to context and which concerns the “aboutness” of the message. However, in my definition of literary nonfiction, both the poetic and the referential function have an equally important role.

A traditional aesthetic definition of ‘literary’ consists of certain requirements, like personal style, figurative language, formal complexity, structural coherence, thematic interest, and semantic density. Stein Haugom Olsen emphasizes a pragmatic and institutional definition of literature, stressing that without certain existing practices and conventions the reader is unable to get any sense of a text as a literary work. Olsen places emphasis upon *intention*, for “[i]t gives no meaning to talk about literary works apart from practices and purposes of authors and readers” (1987: 22). In the context of literary making, “intention” does not signify the original authorial meaning to which the text’s correct interpretation should be related; accordingly, the author’s interpretation of his own production is not relevant. Rather, it is a *pragmatic* issue: when an author produces a text which he claims to be a literary work, he commits himself to having certain aesthetic intentions, and as the reader interprets a text as a literary work, he or she attributes to the author certain aesthetic intentions.¹⁰ Literary competence, as Culler defines it, is a combination of different conventions which are the constituents of the institution of literature (like the rule of significance, metaphorical coherence, and thematic unity) which the reader knows and uses when confronting complex poetic texts. However, these conventions belong not only to the implicit knowledge of the reader but also to the implicit knowledge of authors, for “[t]o write a poem or a novel is immediately to engage with a literary tradition or at the very least with a certain idea of the poem or the novel” (Culler 1975: 116). This kind of active engagement on the author’s part is made possible by the existence of the genre whose conventions the author uses or writes against. We may see this practice in Mailer’s way of

¹⁰ As John Searle suggests, “whether or not a work is literature is for the readers to decide, whether or not it is fiction is for the author to decide” (1979 [1975]: 59). Eric Heyne actually constructs his theory of literary nonfiction partly upon Searle’s pragmatic distinction between fictional and factual statements: “If Searle’s distinction makes sense, it follows that the author is sole determinant of whether a text is fact or fiction, whereas the reader must decide for herself whether the book is good or bad fact” (1987: 480). In addition, we may note that Michael Kearns proposes “a rhetorical narratology” that is grounded in speech-act theory and that provides the basis for his ‘strong-contextualist’ framework. This model means that literary works are “public speech acts” governed by shared conventions of authors and readers (see Kearns 1999: 10, 15).

making use of the traditions of fiction and nonfiction, the novel and history, for his own purposes in the construction of potentially “new” literary forms.¹¹

The novel is a flexible and transforming genre which has always included different modes of writing in itself, combining epic, imaginative, historical, biographical, and journalistic materials, thus being rather fluid and indeterminate by nature. It is not easy to define what the ‘novel’ is; as Bakhtin famously argues, the novel has no definitive form or shape, but it is constantly seeking its form (see 1981: 39).¹² If we regard those arguments according to which the novel is always in the process of becoming, examining what it is and what it is not, we may contend that not even fictivity is an inherent, defining characteristic of the novel (see Lamarque & Olsen 1994: 272; Cohn 1999: 11). By recognizing “the scope of the novel – its range and density, its complexities on every conceivable level,” we may also see how “the self-awareness of the medium presents the reader with startling new discoveries and challenges” (Brink 1998: 18-19). Conscious of existing conventions, historical traditions, and reading practices, the novel is a reflexive genre, always turning towards itself and its own ways of making.

It has been proposed that the first-person novel proceeds largely by borrowing or simulating the narrative features of an authentic autobiography, memoir, or diary, whereas the heterodiegetic fictional narrative is a mimesis of factual forms such as history, chronicles, or newspaper accounts. Thus “the techniques of literary realism and naturalism were long practiced in nonfiction narrative forms,” even predating the modern novel “which borrowed techniques attributed to realism from earlier nonfiction narratives” (Hartsock 2000: 46). Therefore, we may speak of a *reciprocal* relationship between fictional and factual modes. These “reciprocal exchanges” partly confirm the hypothesis that there are no natural and original differences

¹¹ According to Genette, nonfiction may “fictionalize” itself without being transformed into fiction, just as fiction may “defictionalize” itself. This possibility “is the proof that genres can perfectly well change norms – norms that after all [...] were imposed on them by no one but themselves” (1993 [1991]: 83). As Culler puts it, “literature is a practice in which authors attempt to advance or renew literature and thus is always implicitly a reflection on literature itself” (1997: 35).

¹² The difficulty of characterizing and defining the novel is frequently recorded: “What a novel may be is of course always open to some debate” (Alter 1975: xii); “The novel has always been the most comprehensive and ill-defined of literary forms” (Wicker 1975: 1); “That the novel has changed is undeniable, but then again, it was never static: no art form ever is” (Hutcheon 1984: 153); “The novel, always inherently self-conscious, always inherently provisional in its processes of relativizing language through continuous assimilation of discourses, has now and again to stop and examine the process, to see where it is going, to find out what it is” (Waugh 1996 [1984]: 67); “Novels, in a sense,

between fictional and nonfictional regimes, whereas strong historical similarities are more likely. In actual practices we may see that “there is no such thing as pure fiction and no such thing as history so rigorous that it abjures any ‘emplotting’ and any use of novelistic techniques” (Genette 1993 [1991]: 82). As Linda Hutcheon argues, “[I]ike the flower which shares Narcissus’ name, the ‘non-fictional *novel*’ is a natural outgrowth of the old realistic tradition.” She believes that the origins of novelistic self-consciousness may be found in early journal and epistolary novels which are concerned with “writing and reading *within* the structure of the novel itself,” and where “[t]he writer calls his reader’s attention to the activity of writing as an event within the novel” (1984: 12, 16). In the sense that historically the *fictional* novel partly derives from nonfictional modes, the emergence of the self-reflexive *nonfictional* novel is not so much an anomaly as a “natural outgrowth” in this complex tradition and progression.¹³ This, however, goes only part of the way to establishing nonfiction’s relations to the novel, a question that haunts both my own study and Mailer’s nonfictional work with its characteristic negation of “the novel.”

It would appear that *self-reflexivity* is one of those notions that pervade almost everything in contemporary literary, art, and media criticism. Nor is there anything new in literary self-reflexivity as such.¹⁴ However, by focusing on the double meaning of ‘reflexion’ or ‘reflection’ (signifying both ‘mirroring’ and ‘thinking’), I will construct my thesis upon a notion that self-reflexive texts make their readers part of their meaning-making by challenging them to think, to reflect upon both the text and the world the text aims to represent. The notion of self-reflexivity works on various levels, including the typical narrative strategy of disrupting the direct relations between the text and the world; it also works on the level of the referential function (supposedly suspended in fiction). In fact, one of the features of

resist definition, because they are always changing and novelists are always testing the limits of what novels are and can be” (Berger 1997: 125); “The question is whether there has ever been anything like ‘the’ traditional or classical novel. I tend to share Bakhtin’s belief that for a genre in an unceasing process of *becoming*, there *is* no singular Great Tradition, no Ideal Form, no Definitive Shape” (Brink 1998: 6).

¹³ Cf. Hartsock: “One version of the [Bakhtinian] novel that has developed, one that is in opposition to the canonical novel, is the ‘novel’ or ‘narrative’ of narrative literary journalism, or to cite some of the other terminologies that have been applied to such texts, literary nonfiction, or documentary reportage, or new journalism, ad infinitum, indeterminate and fluid, like the shifting form’s attempt to mirror reality” (2000: 49).

¹⁴ “The definitions of self-reflexivity [...] range from explicit reflection on problems such as the complex relation between fiction and reality within literary texts to devices for the ‘baring of the device’ in the Russian Formalist sense, that is, to all those techniques that foreground the artistic nature of the literary work of art and thereby suspend the referential function” (Wesseling 1991: 82).

self-reflexive nonfiction is its complex, often demanding multireferentiality and multifunctionality, which requires a certain amount of reflexivity on the reader's part as well. In this sense "the term 'reflexive' calls our attention to mirror structures (doublings, analogies, frames, *mise en abyme*) and to thought, consciousness, reflection, awareness accompanying action" (Onega & García Landa 1996: 31). Obviously, many definitions of self-reflexive writing (such as theories of metafiction) are rather strongly textual ones – Christine Brooke-Rose, for example, sees that "self-reflexiveness is a form of stylisation" (1981: 371) – leaving out many aspects of literary production and reception. When compared to more traditional self-conscious metafiction, Hutcheon sees that "postmodernism goes beyond self-reflexivity to situate discourse in a broader context" (1988: 41).¹⁵ This can be understood, in fact, by regarding the rapidly growing self-reflexivity of our own, very much media-centered age and cultural situation.¹⁶

It is my suggestion that Mailer's nonfiction represents a specific kind of self-reflexive text which produces a *reflexive reading*, and this is because these nonfictions make the reader reflect upon both the construction of the text and the world itself. In this sense Mailer's nonfiction, partly belonging to the postmodernist currents in contemporary American literature, reacts against the conventions of mimetic realism and problematizes the transparency illusion of reality representation. I do not wish to claim, however, that *all* literary nonfiction is equally self-conscious and critically reflexive. In Mieke Bal's phrasing, "the critical texts lend themselves to the kind of specular and speculative reflexive reading that makes self-reflective reading genuinely relevant" (1991: 256); in other words, "the 'reflexive reading' of texts is a critical paradigm which provides a new way of exploring meaning in literary works" (Onega & García Landa 1996: 31). The competent reader in our media age is one who is familiar with different kinds of textual types and modes of representation, both verbal, visual, and even digital; therefore,

¹⁵ We may note that even though Hutcheon apparently uses the terms 'self-conscious' and 'self-reflexive' as quite synonymous with each other, postmodernism still seems to foreground the latter. It is not only the question of textual self-consciousness, but also of the larger issues of textual production and of the self-reflexivity of reading, interpretation, and reception. It can be argued, then, that *self-referentiality*, and even *self-consciousness* may be typical features of almost all art, for works of art are consciously made with available means and techniques, including realistic works. However, the very idea of *self-reflexivity* may be something that has grown in postmodernism, meaning not only textual, but also cultural reflexivity and the reflexivity of reading.

¹⁶ According to Mark Currie, Hutcheon's main emphasis is on the "seriousness" and "high-culturalness" of postmodernist texts in our media-centered age when everything can be seen as a sign of self-consciousness, and thus "[s]elf-contemplation, or reflexivity, is fundamentally critical because it refers us to other texts" (1998: 68-69).

Mailer's way of self-reflexively situating his sometimes difficult work in this complex media culture requires reflexive competence on the reader's part. Finally, instead of only discussing self-referentially "narcissistic" texts of modernism and postmodernism, I will here deal with a combination of *reflexive* and *rhetorical* approaches. These approaches take into account the complex and reciprocal communicative relationship between actual authors and readers, implied authors and readers, narrators and audiences, and (especially in the case of nonfiction) the relationship between the literary text and the actual world.

Aims, Theories, and Methods

As David Herman argues, classical structuralist narratology has recently ramified into *narratologies*. This means a development of a plurality of models for narrative analysis and an adaptation of a host of methodologies and perspectives which are often in a critical or reflexive relationship to the classical tradition. There is some sense, according to Herman, in speaking of "postclassical" narratology, a kind of metamorphic and interdisciplinary field of study deriving new strength and innovation from reader-response, feminist, psychoanalytic, historicist, rhetorical, linguistic and even deconstructionist practices and theories (see 1999: 1-2). In this study I shall present my own methodical combination of the *rhetorical theory of narrative* (e.g., Booth, Lehman, Phelan), *possible-worlds semantics* (e.g., Doležel, Pavel, Ryan), and the "revised" *classical narratology* considering both *fictional and factual narratives* (e.g., Cohn, Genette, Toker), together with some influences deriving from the branch of "*cognitive*" or "*natural*" *narratology* (e.g., Fludernik, Herman, Jahn). Postclassical narratology welcomes the uses of synthetic and integrative views (see Jahn 1999: 169), and it is my contention that the complex and less than clearly defined field of literary nonfiction requires a multilayered and many-sided theoretical-methodical approach. This approach, despite its specific theoretical toolbox, should still remain a pragmatic approach, one which does not sever its links from actual human concerns.

In my thesis, poetics is generally connected with *pragmatics*, that is, with those specific conditions that make literature possible, including the production and reception of literary works.¹⁷ As Jacob Mey defines it, "literary

¹⁷ We may note the interrelationship between poetics and pragmatics from the point of view of *making* the literary work: "Far from being a passive listener, the reader is an active, creative spirit who participates in the work of making the literary work come about. This 'making' is the true meaning of the word that underlies the original notion of text

pragmatics studies the kinds of effects that authors, as text producers, set to obtain, using the resources of language in their efforts to establish a ‘working cooperation’ with their audiences, the consumers of the texts” (2000: 12). From the viewpoint of literary pragmatics, fictional and nonfictional narratives are distinct kinds of discourse activities using specific rhetorical devices, and their understanding presupposes the understanding of those contextual situations from which they derive. Whereas poetics, especially structuralist narratology, provides us with tools for specifying *textual* signs and structures, pragmatics of literary communication and interpretation stresses the importance of *contextual* issues. These include the contexts of authors and readers in actual literary production and reception, for neither authors nor readers exercise their literary activities in some imaginary space (e.g., B. Pettersson 1999b: 51; Mey 2000: 262; Sell 2000: 61 and *passim*). As the traditional definitions of both poetics and pragmatics imply, both of them are concerned with the conditions that make literature possible. In my own thesis, too, I propose a poetic-pragmatic approach to literary nonfiction.

On the basis of this poetic-pragmatic view, I argue that narrative theorists need not accept a postmodernist and rather non-pragmatic “anything goes” attitude, typically represented by such theorists of historical narrative as Hayden White. Accordingly, Lubomír Doležel warns against too easy “interdisciplinary investigations, “in which many humanists and literary theorists give philosophy, history, and even natural sciences a “literary” treatment. This means that the always complex and diverse problems of these fields “are reduced to concepts current in contemporary literary writing,” so as to suggest that concepts like ‘subject,’ ‘discourse,’ and ‘narrative’ are applicable everywhere (see 1998b: 785). My analysis of both literary and historical, verbal and visual, textual and contextual, and poetic and political aspects of Mailer’s work at least seemingly calls for a certain kind of “interdisciplinary” approach,¹⁸ but we should not welcome the blessings of interdisciplinarity as such. It seems that in our contemporary media reality there are “narratives” everywhere, so much so that the concept is losing its validity.¹⁹ Narrative has been defined as a semiotic representation of a series

creation: the Greek *poieîn*, ‘to make’, from which ‘poetry’ has its origin” (Mey 2000: 8). See also Teun A. van Dijk’s seminal essay “Pragmatics and Poetics” (1976).

¹⁸ Compare the former narratologist Mieke Bal, who suggests the appropriateness of an interdisciplinary analysis in her reading of relations between verbal and visual art, situating her study on Rembrandt “within the rapidly growing field of critical studies of culture” (1991: 4).

¹⁹ Recent literary and cultural theories have consequently more and more emphasized the meaning, importance, and cultural relevance of story-telling and narrativity. Accord-

of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way and, alternatively, as a complex phenomenon which can be analyzed from an infinite number of perspectives (see Onega & García Landa 1996: 3; Cobley 2001: 7). William Nelles argues that to use the tools of narratology on a text is to make that text into a narrative, or, to put it in another way, “narratives are those texts that we use narratology to study” (1997: 120). As I would argue, however, not all discussion of narratives “qualifies” as narratology (in the sense of a ‘scientific’ analysis of narrative structures), and it may even be argued that “the narratology of the nonfiction novel” as proposed by Mas’ud Zavarzadeh (1976: 1 and *passim*) focuses at least as much on the questions of contemporary society as it does on the problems of contemporary poetics.²⁰

This is not, of course, to suggest that narratological study on nonfictional poetics cannot be done. We may remind ourselves of Genette’s important notion that “narratology [. . .] ought to be concerned with all sorts of narrative, fictional or not” and that “whatever strengths and weaknesses narratology may have in its current state, it is unlikely to exempt us from having to undertake a specific study of factual narrative” (1993 [1991]: 54, 55). Similarly, Monika Fludernik notes that more recent trends in narratology that have started to deal with nonfictional genres have helped to point the way towards a more adequate representation of narrative in all its manifestations. She holds, however, that these narratological approaches (e.g., Cohn, Genette) “still concentrate on highly complex narrative forms and indeed posit very abstract criteria of differentiation between the fictional

ingly, “we understand our experiences through the stories that we tell” (Price 1999: 306), or “we all make use of [narrative thought] as we create our own life stories from our experience” (Sukenick 2000: 6). In Mailer’s own words, “we tell ourselves stories in order to make sense of life. Narrative is reassuring” (SA 156). In the 1990s it became fashionable to speak of “the narrative turn,” visible in different academic fields from social to medical sciences and being a strong sign of ‘global interdisciplinarity’ and related phenomena. As these developments suggested, narrative studies were not (and had never been) the exclusive domain of literary theory. About the narrative turn and various interdisciplinary approaches see, for example, B. Pettersson (1999a) and especially Kreiswirth (2000), who provides a survey of recent developments.

²⁰ Another question would be whether a poetics of nonfiction should be reliably based on *structuralist* poetics alone. According to one critic writing deliberately outside of poetics, the structuralist theorist “could not concern himself with the relationship between literary works and the world, between literary works and their authors or literary works and their readers. [. . .] A poetics based on the axiom of objectivity will have no tools for dealing with these types of relationships, nor, indeed, will it recognize any questions concerning them as falling within poetics” (Olsen 1987: 91-92). As Olsen argues, to cut off the literary work from authors, readers, and the world is to cut off from any meaningful, valuable, and interesting function literary works can fulfil. From the vantage point

and the non-fictional” (1996: 55). On the other hand, as Genette points out, theorists who have been interested in the figural devices and rhetorical strategies of factual narratives have deliberately approached those texts from the vantage point of some other discipline than narratology. There is, still, some sense in distinguishing between *narratology* and *narrative theory*: “Where narratology describes a particular way of analyzing texts in order to arrive at interpretation or categorization, narrative theory considers more philosophical questions about the nature of narrative by viewing it from a variety of linguistic, social, and political perspectives” (Punday 1998: 895). In addition to this attempt at “broadening” the field of narrative studies, narrative theory extends its focus of interest to textual types and art forms beyond the scope of prose fiction – narratology’s traditional subject matter – and provides some valuable comment on the matters of literary nonfiction as well.

New approaches in narrative theory take into account the role of audience design in storytelling: “[A]t stake are ways in which storytellers structure narrative discourse to promote certain kinds of interpretive – cognitive, emotive, evaluative – responses” (Herman 1999: 11). What I find especially valuable in recent formulations of narrative theory are those models of analysis and interpretation that have been developed from the narratological basis, such as the *rhetorical theory of narrative*, which has taken a critical stance towards “purely” formalist-structuralist assumptions of classical narratology. In his appropriately titled study *Rhetorical Narratology*, Michael Kearns argues that at some point narratology needed to take a strong rhetorical turn without losing its distinguished “technical” orientation (see 1999: x, 2-3). I believe that a rhetorical theory of narrative appears pragmatically fruitful in the context of nonfiction, as something that widens and enriches structuralist analysis by its understanding of narratives as complex rhetorical transactions between authors, narrators, and various kinds of audiences.²¹ In this sense we should pay more attention to the ways in which different audiences encounter and experience narratives that make claims about their experiential reality. In his classic book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), Wayne Booth challenged the formalist focus on the literary work (especially narrative fiction) as a self-contained structure of devices and proposed a more rhetorical model including the communication be-

of literary pragmatics, it has been noted that “narratology has tended to overlook the real world in which literary intercourse actually takes place” (Sell 2000: 45).

²¹ In my study I will systematically use such basic “tools” of structuralist narratology as *author*, *narrator*, *character*, *implied author* and *implied reader*, *focalization*, and *free indirect discourse (FID)*. My special debt to the rhetorical theory of narrative is the distinction between authorial and narrative *audiences*, the former corresponding to the ‘implied

tween (implied) authors and their audiences. As Booth suggests, narratives always have a rhetorical and ethical effect on the reader; similarly, Seymour Chatman, in his almost as classic *Story and Discourse* (1978), discusses those elements of the narrative that individual authors use to achieve their specific purposes.²²

The rhetorical theory of narrative looks at the importance of complex relationships between authors, readers, narrators, audiences, and subject matters, and attempts a close analysis of how particular narratives are told to particular audiences in particular ways. In the study of nonfictional narratives, where the author deals with a “shared,” often publicly known event or subject matter, and communicates his or her “vision” to the reader who then responds, the rhetorical approach is particularly important. Consequently, a rhetorical narrative theory or the study of “narrative rhetoric” may provide tools for analyzing complex and multireferential communication happening in nonfictional narratives.²³ Interestingly, then, in his book *Matters of Fact: Reading Nonfiction over the Edge* (1997), Daniel Lehman proposes the sort of close reading of nonfictional narratives that grows from the rhetorical tradition of narrative theory into readings that examine texts within culture. Constructing his rhetorical approach especially on the basis of James Phelan’s *Narrative as Rhetoric* (1996), Lehman suggests that Phelan’s framework of rhetorical communication between author, text, and reader should be expanded to admit a fourth player, “the actual living or lived beings that make up the subjects of nonfictional narrative” (1997: 23). The rhetorical approach helps us to see that nonfiction is not a fiction-like “closed” system of intratextual signs and links (that is, not a “self-contained” structure in the New Critical sense) but more likely an “open” field for rhetorical communication, negotiation, and sometimes resistance. Thus, in the study of nonfiction, the rhetorical approach – more so than the for-

reader’ and the latter corresponding to the ‘narratee’ in a structuralist terminology. See also useful glossaries in Phelan (1996: 215-220 and 2005: 213-219).

²² The “rhetorical turn” that Chatman’s narratology takes is developed in his subsequent *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (1990). As Kearns notes, however, despite his promising title Chatman does not fully explain how rhetorical effects can be analyzed or how narrative’s elements affect audience response (see 1999: 6). In this sense, Chatman’s work still represents the mainstream of structuralist narratology with its emphasis on narratives as systematic formal constructions.

²³ To be sure, a rhetorical theory of narrative easily broadens into an interdisciplinary field as well, being partly influenced by deconstruction, Bakhtinian linguistics, reader-response theory, and various ideological (including feminist) approaches. In this sense the following critique only captures the “Boothian” tradition in the rhetorical theory of narrative: “For all its common-sensical appeal, rhetorical narrative theories make several problematic assumptions: that writers are more or less fully self-conscious, that readers pick up on all rhetorical clues, and that reading is a more or less unified march toward the

malist-textualist focus – provides a valuable method for analyzing the multilayered communications between authors and their audiences and those audiences’ cognitive, emotional, and ethical engagement with narratives (cf. Phelan 2005: 5). To my mind, rhetorical theory appears to have specific power in the discussion of *nonfiction*, whereas classical narratology with its exact methodological tools may still be better applicable to the modes and worlds of *fiction*.

In my study, rhetoric is obviously interconnected with poetics and pragmatics in the sense that authors try to persuade their readers by certain textual and narrative techniques, which may be designated “the art of writing.”²⁴ In the sense that Mailer’s nonfiction constantly deals with well-known public events, it employs rhetoric as a style, as an “art of speech, an art concerned with the use of public speaking as a means of persuasion” (Bradford 1997: 3). In addition, rhetoric must by its nature entail an acute sense of the audience as well as of the process of communication, so that a rhetorical approach to literary texts leads to “a *reader-oriented* criticism which posits as its central question: how do readers construct the text?” (Furst 1992a: 14). What especially interests me here is how the modes of reading and interpretation are “written” in the texts and how the readers of these texts follow, confront, and challenge textual signs and guides, partly always becoming “implied” readers in the narrative communication, partly always resisting this implication and remaining actual readers, or “flesh-and-blood” readers, as rhetorical theory has it. If we contend that literary texts produced by actual authors and interpreted by actual readers use poetic, strategic, and rhetorical devices to obtain specific textual effects, we have a working definition which takes into account both poetics, pragmatics, and the rhetoric of narrative.

conclusion that the author wishes the reader to draw” (Punday 1998: 899). By contrast, Phelan charts the differences between Booth’s authorial and intentional approach and his own: “The approach I am advocating shifts emphasis from the author as controller to the recursive relationships among authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response, to the way in which our attention to each of these elements both influence and can be influenced by the other two” (1996: 19). Phelan’s own approach is based on an antifoundationalism which sees the reading of literary texts as “endlessly recursive.” In its broad employment of various methods, the field of rhetorical theory still remains quite open and perhaps undefined, at least when compared to the “closed” system of structuralism.

²⁴ In its most classic (Aristotelian) sense, the study of rhetoric means an emphasis on figures and tropes, whereas in a broader sense it means looking at how texts affect readers and how narratives act as communication between author and reader (e.g., Kearns 1999: 6).

Norman Mailer's Nonfiction: Themes and Approaches

So we are thinking of Mailer,²⁵ and the examples that I am going to deal with in this study are Mailer's main works of literary nonfiction, with brief references to his fictional narratives. I will focus on those works which (by a common understanding) can be regarded as Mailer's classics or "masterpieces" among his literary nonfiction, namely *The Armies of the Night* (1968) and *The Executioner's Song* (1979), while I will also attempt a close analysis of some of his most self-theoretical texts like *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970) and *Oswald's Tale* (1995). Other "novelistic" works of nonfiction dealt with in this study are *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968), *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971), *St. George and the Godfather* (1972), *Marilyn* (1973), *The Fight* (1975), and *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man* (1995). In addition, I will make occasional ventures into the most inspiring aspects of Mailer's individual essays in collections such as *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), *The Presidential Papers* (1963), *Cannibals and Christians* (1966), *Existential Errands* (1972), and *Pieces and Pontifications* (1982). Some of Mailer's most recent works are anthologies of his writings from several decades: *The Time of Our Time* (1998) and *The Spooky Art* (2003), and parts of these books also belong to the corpus of my study. As I aim to show, the poetics of Mailer's nonfiction is constructed upon intertextual links with his fictional work; therefore, I shall briefly comment on his novels *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), *Barbary Shore* (1951), *The Deer Park* (1955), *An American Dream* (1965), *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967), *Ancient Evenings* (1983), *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1984), *Harlot's Ghost* (1991), and *The Gospel According to the Son* (1997).²⁶

²⁵ See the beginning of *Marilyn*: "So we are thinking of Marilyn" (M 15).

²⁶ It is not my aim in this study to construct a full picture of Mailer's work. My focus is on Mailer's nonfictional poetics and its relations to his fiction. While Mailer is one of the most-studied of modern American writers, a large part of the theoretical and critical work on him is devoted to his fiction (or to his biographical person, for that matter). There was a certain Renaissance of Mailer studies in the 1970s, but recent years have seen a rather small amount of theoretical contributions dealing with his work. The central book-length studies discussing Mailer's work appear to be the following: Barry H. Leeds: *The Structured Vision of Norman Mailer* (1969), Richard Poirier: *Norman Mailer* (1972), Robert Solotaroff: *Down Mailer's Way* (1974), Jean Radford: *Norman Mailer: A Critical Study* (1975), Stanley T. Gutman: *Mankind in Barbary: The Individual and the Society in the Novels of Norman Mailer* (1975), Laura Adams: *Existential Battles: The Growth of Norman Mailer* (1976), Jonathan Middlebrook: *Mailer and the Time of His*

The Complexities of Mailer's Poetics

Norman Mailer (b. 1923) has become a notorious example of a modern writer whose work is constantly being read through his public acts and media performances. It has been proposed that Mailer is the most visible of contemporary American novelists. In contrast to, for instance, Thomas Pynchon's radical invisibility, "it might be said that [Mailer] lives *in* public, lives *off* publicity, asserting his hyper-visible ego" (Tanner 1982: 13; cf. Bloom 1986: 1; Lennon [ed.] 1988: xiii; Moran 2000: 70-71). Therefore it has become a commonplace to argue that Mailer's literary art cannot be separated from his extraliterary performances or from his disturbing public personality (see Adams 1976: 8-9). Among Mailer scholars there has sometimes been a certain amount of frustration as the writer's considerable status as an artist is overshadowed and obscured by his "hyper-visible ego"; thus, Mailer "presents a special problem to anyone trying to arrive at a clear understanding of his work for he has gained notoriety as a public figure as well as a writer" (Bufithis 1978: 1).²⁷

Even leading Mailer scholars like Richard Poirier – whose *Norman Mailer*, published in the "Modern Masters" series in the early 1970s,

Times (1976), Robert Ehrlich: *Norman Mailer: The Radical as Hipster* (1978), Philip H. Bufithis: *Norman Mailer* (1978), Robert Merrill: *Norman Mailer* (1978), Sandy Cohen: *Norman Mailer's Novels* (1979), Jennifer Bailey: *Norman Mailer: Quick-Change Artist* (1979), Andrew Gordon: *An American Dreamer: A Psychoanalytic Study of the Fiction of Norman Mailer* (1980), Robert Begiebing: *Acts of Regeneration: Allegory and Archetype in the Works of Norman Mailer* (1980), Joseph Wenke: *Mailer's America* (1987), Nigel Leigh: *Radical Fictions and the Novels of Norman Mailer* (1990), Robert Merrill: *Norman Mailer Revisited* (1992), Michael K. Glenday: *Norman Mailer* (1995), and Barry H. Leeds: *The Enduring Vision of Norman Mailer* (2002). Other Mailer studies, such as biographies and collections of essays, include Richard Foster: *Norman Mailer* (1968), Donald L. Kaufmann: *Norman Mailer: The Countdown* (1969), Robert F. Lucid (ed.): *Norman Mailer: The Man and His Work* (1971), Joe Flaherty: *Managing Mailer* (1971), Leo Braudy (ed.): *Norman Mailer: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1972), Laura Adams (ed.): *Will the Real Norman Mailer Please Stand Up?* (1974), Hilary Mills: *Mailer: A Biography* (1982), Peter Manso: *Mailer: His Life and Times* (1985), J. Michael Lennon (ed.): *Critical Essays on Norman Mailer* (1986), Harold Bloom (ed.): *Modern Critical Views: Norman Mailer* (1986; 2003), J. Michael Lennon (ed.): *Conversations with Norman Mailer* (1988), Carl Rollyson: *The Lives of Norman Mailer: A Biography* (1991), and Mary V. Dearborn: *Mailer: A Biography* (1999). See also Laura Adams: *Norman Mailer: A Bibliography* (1974) for an early bibliography of Mailer studies, and an extended bibliography in J. Michael Lennon (ed.): *Norman Mailer: Works and Days* (2000).

²⁷ Of course, Mailer has been a familiar target in a host of literary-biographical and ideological studies ranging from feminist (e.g., Millett 1977 [1969]; Fetterley 1978) to social (Gutman 1975), political (Ehrlich 1978), and psychoanalytical (Gordon 1980) readings.

marked the author's canonization – feel somewhat troubled when trying to combine what seem to be the author's two sides, that of “the marvelously fastidious stylist” and that of “the boisterous, the vulgar actor” (1972: 156). Critically reflecting on Poirier's approach, Joseph Wenke, in his own attempt at Mailer's canonization in *Mailer's America*, argues that “Mailer's books are ‘best considered’ not as ‘one large work’ in progress but as separate, finished works” (1987: 5). As Robert Merrill argues in his study *Norman Mailer Revisited*, according to a common understanding, Mailer's ideas are more interesting than his art. Thus critics have been “quick to emphasize the figure behind the books” and, almost as a consequence, “they usually fail to illuminate the nature of Mailer's art” (1992: x-xi). Merrill, however, maintains that in order to fully understand (and appreciate) Mailer's work, we ought to see his ideas as they are realized in works of art, and only by making aesthetic distinctions can we arrive at a just assessment of Mailer's importance as a writer. Instead of only focusing on thematic, or biographical, aspects of Mailer's work (fiction and nonfiction), Merrill stresses his interest in the literary and aesthetic structure of the writer's individual achievements, thus deliberately diverging from that line of Mailer scholarship which has been intent on grappling with the author's personality or ideology.

Even in a work of nonfiction (e.g., *The Armies of the Night*) the text implies a kind of author who, inside the book, is full and coherent as compared to the real-life person who has written the book under certain conditions. Here we see the marks of Mailerian literary self-reflexivity: in *Armies* Mailer is “present” as a character, as the narrator and the author of the text as implied by the text itself. The reader may also have a glimpse of the real writer (and the public celebrity, journalist, movie-maker, arrogant personality, self-conscious egotist), who has produced the text and whose image is self-ironically described and analyzed by the narrative. While Mailer has produced this text, the text also (re)produces Mailer, and it is a question of “performance” at the level of living and writing. As Wayne Booth maintains: “We have a great deal of evidence, from Laurence Sterne to Norman Mailer, that artists often imitate the roles they create. [...] To dwell with a creative task for as long as is required to perform it means that one tends to *become* the work – at least to some degree” (1988: 128). According to Booth's rhetorical and ethical theory of narrative, the reader should understand the difference between the *career author* and the *public myth*. The term ‘career author’ refers to different works by the same author, an *oeuvre*, which implies a certain kind of picture of the author and which

can be coherent (so that the author's *ethos* remains the same) or varying, including conflicting visions.

In its deepest sense, and according to Booth's ethical criticism, an understanding of the career author may lead to an evaluation and possible appreciation of the actual author. It is important to note, in this sense, that the apparently autobiographical tone and position of some of Mailer's nonfictions draws the reader's attention to the actual author's life and work. These questions, which are usually revealed in those cases where the writer's *fiction* is being read in the context of his or her life and deeds, are highlighted when the author is a well-known and controversial public figure who draws the attention of the media, be it Mark Twain, Oscar Wilde, or Norman Mailer. Booth further suggests:

A good deal that passes for ethical criticism is really about such myths, and it shows little or no connection with anything to be found in actual narratives. Or perhaps we should say, it constructs new mythical narratives with heroes connected only obscurely, if at all, to the author's narratives. To damn a book because of what is said about the author in the Sunday supplements is "unethical" ethical criticism indeed. And it is to fail in our responsibility to the implied author of *this tale*. (1988: 151)

In fact, Mailer has almost always been the first to discuss the problematic relationship between his life and art. This also happens in many self-ironic reflections in *The Armies of the Night*, where the author famously objectifies himself as a third-person character "Norman Mailer":

Mailer had the most developed sense of image; if not, he would have been a figure of deficiency, for people had been regarding him by his public image since he was twenty-five years old. He had in fact 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. [...] In any event, Mailer worked for the image, and therefore he detested the portrait of himself which would be promulgated if no one could *ever* reach him. (AN 5-6)

The narrative of *The Armies of the Night* as a whole is constructed upon the playful distinction between the visionary artist writing the book and the sometimes inept character acting on the story level. Ironically, then, more often than not the burlesque public performances of the "character" Mailer have been associated with the serious artist working in private and cultivating his style and literary form. While very visible on one level, on another level Mailer may emerge as a most enigmatic (while also a most gargantuan) character in postwar America, being one of the very few "serious" literary artists to achieve the public status usually reserved for politicians or

popular stars (see Moran 2000: 1, 70-71). As Michael Glenday writes in his monograph *Norman Mailer*, Mailer “has shown skill in achieving celebrity for his ideas, dramatizing the public personae, while remaining essentially private” (1995: 3).²⁸ The “Mailer” which emerges in Mailer’s nonfictions should be regarded not as an “egoistic” figure (as popular media would have it) but rather as a highly complicated and self-critical mind who accepts the ambivalences of those personae he adopts (see Gindin 1986: 560). We may see that Mailer’s alter ego Aquarius in *Of a Fire on the Moon* is characterized as “the Nijinsky of Ambivalence” (FM 472). The fluidity, ambivalence, and creativity of identities is, of course, a typical Mailerian theme in his fiction, including *An American Dream*, *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, and especially *Ancient Evenings*.

As my study focuses on Mailer’s literary nonfiction, I deliberately take my position among those critics who see the most enduring value of his work as residing outside the conventional (fictional) novel.²⁹ In some cases it may even seem that my emphasis on the importance of nonfiction in Mailer’s work differs from the author’s own position, which usually takes fiction to be the very principle of literary and creative writing.³⁰ Harold Bloom, the “canonical” critic of modern American letters, suggests that Mailer, more than any other writer, has broken down the distinction between fiction and journalism. Interestingly, Bloom regards this kind of breaking down generally as “an aesthetic misfortune,” but not necessarily in Mailer’s individual case, “since *the mode now seems his own*” (1986: 4; my emphasis). Barbara Lounsberry suggests that Mailer has, across his career, “insistently described himself as a novelist rather than as a nonfiction artist, despite the fact that in both quantity and quality his greater contribution

²⁸ As Christopher Hitchens suggests in his portrait and interview of Mailer, this author is a representative of “a minority of one,” an idiosyncratic personality not easily converted to the modes of general consensus, but more likely “[q]uite accustomed to arguing against, as well as advertising, himself.” Consequently, “[h]is deliberately paradoxical stance of ‘left conservatism’ is offered semi-belligerently as a challenge to those who remain fixed in orthodoxy or correctness” (1997: 115-116).

²⁹ Compare also one of the more recent encyclopedic introductions to Mailer: “Mailer’s most lasting mark on the history of the novel will probably be his role as an innovator of what would come to be called the nonfiction novel” (Klinkowitz 1998: 800).

³⁰ The use of the concept of ‘fiction’ in scare quotes derives from one of Mailer’s earliest (1954) theoretical discussions: “There is finally no way one can try to apprehend complex reality without ‘fiction’. [...] And one may even attempt to reshape reality in some small way with the ‘fiction’ as a guide” (AM 181). In the foreword to his 1998 anthology *The Time of Our Time*, Mailer writes: “[N]early everything I have written derives from my sense of the value of fiction. There is little in this book, even when it comes under the formal category of non-fiction or argument, that has not derived, then, from my understanding of how one writes fiction” (TOT xi-xii).

has been to literary nonfiction” (1990: 139). But though it has become a commonplace that Mailer’s *real* achievement is to be found in his nonfiction, “it is curious that Mailer’s much-admired nonfiction should generate so little critical commentary” (Merrill 1992: 83) – in fact, my own thesis is the first book-length study specially devoted to the poetics and problems of Mailer’s nonfiction.³¹ Whereas Mailer’s position as a nonfiction artist is close to canonical, there has been disagreement concerning his stature as a fiction writer. It has been suggested that Mailer has always faced difficulties in shaping and transforming his literary style and imagination into the achieved works of *fiction* but has been more successful in transfiguring his nonfictional narratives into works of *literature*: “There is considerable irony in the fact that in his creative journalism Mailer should have subjected facts to the transfiguring design we find in, say, *The Armies of the Night*, but that in a work of fiction like *Harlot’s Ghost* his readers are expected to do without the well-shaped design in the interests of realism” (Glenday 1995: 138). Paradoxically, then, to some critics Mailer’s nonfiction may express more literary imagination and creative form-construction than his fiction. To be exact, however, the strict distinction between fictional and factual narratives does not characterize the complexity and self-reflexivity of Mailer’s use of the literary form. In fact, Mailer is difficult to understand if one works with limited notions of literary genres.

Instead of approaching his work through firm categories of ‘factual’ and ‘fictional’ writing, we need to grasp Mailer’s self-reflection upon his *peculiar form of non-fiction*, as defined in the middle of the narrative of *Oswald’s Tale*. According to Jennifer Bailey, “Mailer’s metaphorical version of order suggests that there is a moral truth which is no less real because of its apparently paradoxical nature” (1979: 45). As Wenke also suggests, “paradox has always been Mailer’s favorite intellectual companion,” and Mailer’s use of paradox can be seen in his famous coinages such as ‘left conservatism,’ ‘novel biography,’ or ‘history as a novel/the novel as history’ (see 1987: 212). The culmination point of Mailer’s art of nonfiction, *The Armies of the Night*, thus characterizes itself as neither ‘novel’ nor ‘history’ in any pure sense, but precisely, through its subtitle, as *History as a Novel/The Novel as History*. As my analyses will suggest, Mailer tries to transform his

³¹ The most interesting overviews of Mailer’s nonfiction so far have been provided by Hollowell (1977), Hellmann (1981), Anderson (1987), and Lounsbury (1990), who all devote large chapters in their books to Mailer’s work. In some of these, especially in Hellmann and Anderson, there is a rather conspicuous (and questionable) inclination to see Mailer’s nonfiction in connection with postmodernist fiction. Among the monographs on Mailer’s work, Bailey (1979), Wenke (1987), and Merrill (1992) pay considerable attention to Mailer’s nonfiction.

factual materials into the form of a literary work, the metaphorical “novel.” However, one of the most idiosyncratic consequences of Mailer’s self-reflexivity is a more or less visible emphasis on the “failure” in any textual representation of reality. This means that Mailer’s nonfictional narratives critically reflect upon their means, “laying bare the device,” as formalists would have it. In a characteristic Mailerian negation of the nonfictional form it transpires that *the novel* is the ideal form of representation, while the relationships between fiction, nonfiction, and the novel remain deliberately problematic in Mailer’s poetics.

Mailer’s *formal* concerns in his nonfiction are closely connected with his *thematic* issues: a specific view of the world is represented by a specific literary form. From this viewpoint, we may note that Mailer’s main works of nonfiction are quite different from each other, but still the difference is more on the formal than on the thematic level. It is a commonplace to argue that there is a strong thematic consistency (even a sense of repetition) in Mailer’s *oeuvre*; for example, in a recent monograph on the author, Barry Leeds (2002) discusses Mailer’s “enduring vision.” Mailer’s works can often be read as stylistic experiments in connection with personal performances, but it is important to note that each work, be it fiction or nonfiction, is an individual text providing “Mailers” of their own despite certain thematic and stylistic repetitions.³² The artistic form of a literary text can be understood as a meaningful and functional pattern and structure, which gives some shape to the always complex and chaotic reality. As Stein Haugom Olsen notes, *theme* is “of the essence of literature, and literary appreciation necessarily involves the recognition of theme” (1987: 180). Apparently, factual narratives frequently grapple with *topical themes*, be they social or political concerns of their time. However, it can be argued that thematic aspects of Mailer’s nonfictional works are not limited to topi-

³² Perhaps we may find a certain “thematic dominant” in Mailer’s work (compare Tammi [1985: 17] on Nabokov). Nevertheless, Mailer’s individual works, at least the most distinguished among them, provide narrative, stylistic, and formal concerns and innovations of their own. As Philip Bufithis argues: “Whatever *formal* or *artistic* differences we find among Mailer’s work, we should not imagine a *thematic* difference when, in fact, none exists” (1978: 3; my emphases). This statement may be too rough: one should expect change and development in a literary career as long as Mailer’s. There is even a certain problem in my use of a descriptive term “Mailerian” to designate Mailer’s nonfictional poetics in some parts of this study, for there can be no easy summary as to what “Mailerian” or “Maileresque” should contain. Mailer has rendered this kind of labeling problematic (or empty) when discussing the style of *The Executioner’s Song*: “[John W. Aldridge:] Of course, if you had been much more Maileresque, you would have ended up writing a different kind of book. [Mailer:] Maileresque is your word, not mine” (Lennon [ed.] 1988: 265).

cal themes deriving from the actual world history (demonstrations, political conventions, moon shots, executions, assassinations); they are also constructed upon *perennial themes* (ontological, philosophical, religious, and so on). In Olsen's view, a literary work which yields to analysis in terms of perennial thematic concepts has a more universal interest than a work which can only be interpreted by aid of topical thematic concepts (see *ibid.*: 190). Following Aristotle, one could say that topical themes are particular issues that belong to the concerns of historiography, whereas perennial themes are universal and therefore belong to the field of poetry.

My readings of Mailer's texts aim to show that his work (both fiction and nonfiction) can be helpfully contextualized in terms of specific philosophical and mythological frameworks (existentialism, Manicheanism, romanticism) and various literary traditions and conventions (the romance novel, realism/naturalism, postmodernism). What is especially "peculiar" or "paradoxical" in the nature of Mailer's *nonfiction*, is its strong reliance on poetic, romantic, and mythical visions of reality, and here Mailer's formal (narrative, stylistic) and thematic (philosophical, ideological) concerns come together. I would even argue that Mailer's idiosyncratic combination of Jewish mysticism and factual reporting of contemporary events is one of the oddest phenomena in (post)modernist literature. Mailer sees history and reality not as an object of cold, objective, factual, and scientific study, but as a "Cubist" form, as a complex, mysterious, mythical, and transforming field of opposing forces, good and evil, which can only be approached with the imaginative speculations and poetic vision of "the novelist" or "the artist." At the center of Mailer's artistic universe is a creative individual (a writer, a painter, a boxer, or even a "philosophical" criminal-psychopath) as opposed to unimaginative and "totalitarian" systems of other men. In Mailer's personal scheme, the most effective mode of resistance and creative self-definition is personal courage and *style*, both style in living and style in one's art.³³ As Richard Foster, in his relatively early "pamphlet" on Mailer's work, suggests, "Mailer's style of imagination is a *forcing* style: it exerts *force* upon reality; it seeks to *force* reality into the matrix of an idiosyncratic vision" (1968: 33-34). My thesis proposes that Mailer's self-conscious

³³ "Style is character," reads one of Mailer's credos (see CC 246; SA 77). In *The Armies of the Night* he reflects that "the truth of his material was revealed to a good writer by the cutting edge of his style" (AN 87-88). As it has been suggested by Frank McConnell, "Mailer is obsessed throughout his career with the 'cutting edge of style,' the idea of an absolutely original, individual prose idiom as a kind of saving grace against the impingements of 'other men's systems'" (1977: xxviii). While hegemonic discourses and totalitarian/technological power organizations have no style, it remains the mission of the poet or the novelist to force upon reality *his* style.

literary nonfiction represents his characteristic style and his idiosyncratic vision of the world, a practice in which artistic form and thematic content are closely interconnected.

The Plot of the Study

The first parts of my study are concerned with two general theoretical issues, *the poetics and pragmatics of literary nonfiction* (Chapter I) and *Mailer's narrative poetics*, evident in both his fiction and nonfiction (Chapter II). The following analytical chapters, or case studies of four central texts in Mailer's *oeuvre*, deal with various problems in Mailer's nonfictional poetics and employ different tools and methods in order to illuminate those problems. These four analytical chapters (III-VI) place emphasis upon the issues of *narration, representation, language* and *rhetoric*, respectively, taking into account the overlap between them. Chapter III is devoted to an analysis of the modes and roles of the author, the narrator and the self-consciously novelistic character Norman Mailer in *The Armies of the Night*. By speaking of himself in the third person and constructing "himself" as a protagonist, Mailer as author-narrator juxtaposes the methods of historiography and the novel. In *Armies*, he emphasizes how our sense and experience of history is always "filtered" through some subjective vision, which may still provide a path to deeper truths. Chapter IV is devoted to the problematics of verbal and visual representation in Mailer's attempt to "cover" the first moon flight in *Of a Fire on the Moon*. Through allusions to different arts, media, and languages, including intertextual links to specific works (especially Melville's *Moby-Dick*), the text proposes a multidimensional and intersemiotic approach to the complex and mysterious event. *Fire* also serves as my main example of a "meta-nonfictional" Mailerian narrative which makes the story of writing the book an embedded plot structure reflecting the actual process of literary production. Chapter V deals with the "phenomenological" construction of figures of whiteness, void, and meaninglessness in Mailer's "true life novel" about the life and death of Gary Gilmore, *The Executioner's Song*. By constructing an invisible narrative voice, the book offers a variety of fragmented and fluctuating points of view on the complex and unanswerable questions of murder and execution, especially as conducted through the seemingly fictive device of free indirect discourse. Finally, Chapter VI discusses the positions of author, reader, and historical subject and the functioning of the rhetorical commu-

nication in *Oswald's Tale*. Dealing with the ultimate American mystery, the assassination of President Kennedy, the author-narrator's rhetoric elicits the reader-audience's collaboration in the process of its solving, while the subject matter seems to require both ethical and aesthetic response from an individual reader.

My analysis of Mailer's literary work does not represent a search for solid and specific authorial intentions but rather constructs Mailer in the roles of 'career' and 'implied' authors and places his work on the level of *literary* and *textual* production. I would still like to contend that Norman Mailer's own, rather informal poetics is one of my guides in this study from beginning to end. As Mailer says in an interview, "I've always leaned on the side that literature, finally, is a guide – that it explains complex matters to us, it gives us a deeper understanding of our existence" (Lennon [ed.] 1988: 234). However, in its journey through the major works of Mailer's nonfiction the study will take separate routes, providing a collage of differing viewpoints on Mailer's work and on larger poetics of literary nonfiction, and foregrounding itself as an open interpretative process rather than a finished product with clear answers in advance. Instead of stating some fixed "facts" about its subject matter, my approach positions itself in current narrative theory, which is "ultimately self-reflexive" (O'Neill 1994: 5; cf. Phelan & Rabinowitz 1994: 2, 7) and which is "not so much exploring *facts* as constructing an interpretation" (Lamarque 1996: 58).³⁴ "This is, after all, a book that depends upon the small revelation of separate points of view," as Mailer reflects in *Oswald's Tale* (OT 197). Mailer concludes that "all means of inquiry have to be available when one is steering one's way through a cloud – especially if there are arguments about the accuracy of the navigating instruments, which in this case are the facts" (OT 353). Let us begin our navigation in Chapter I by delineating a theoretical basis of literary nonfiction and by proposing a poetics and pragmatics of nonfiction in a reciprocal relationship to Mailer's work.

³⁴ As David Herman puts it, "a hallmark of postclassical narratology is its abiding concern with the process and not merely the product of narratological inquiry; stories are not just preexistent structures, waiting to be found by the disinterested observer; rather, properties of the object being investigated, narrative, are relativized across frameworks of investigation, which must themselves be included in the domain under study" (1999: 16). Herman is referring here especially to James Phelan and Mary Patricia Martin's rhetorical analysis in the volume *Narratologies* (1999).

Chapter I

Toward a Poetics and Pragmatics of Literary Nonfiction

This chapter discusses the distinction between fiction and nonfiction by focusing on questions of narrative structure, poetic style, different aspects of referentiality, and the ethics of reality representation. While the methods and tools provided by formalist-structuralist narratology are employed, I argue that in nonfiction studies we need a more semantic, pragmatic, and philosophical analysis as well, and here the theory of possible worlds becomes applicable. However, as it is one of my purposes in this study to argue for the *literariness* of nonfiction, I attempt to show that its poetic, narrative, and stylistic facets are in many ways indistinguishable from those of literary fiction. I will place Mailer's nonfiction in the historical context of factual/fictional writing and in that of American literary postmodernism which heralds the emergence of self-reflexive metafiction, fabulation, and various generic anomalies and experiments such as "the nonfiction novel." This section will end with the claim that self-reflexive texts, like literary nonfictions, may produce "reflexive" readings.

A Formalist Focus on Fiction and Nonfiction

Focusing mainly on textual and formal features, much recent criticism aims, on the one hand, to eliminate the pragmatic differences between fictional and nonfictional writing or, on the other hand, to maintain their strict qualitative distinction. In what follows, I attempt to construct a distinction between fiction and nonfiction on a formal basis, still suggesting that literary nonfiction may function rather ambiguously between purely fictional and factual modes.

History as a Text

It can be argued that a still prevailing theoretical paradigm (a combination of poststructuralism and postmodernism) has tended to blur the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. There has been a growing scepticism regarding our ability to reach a consensus about ‘facts’ and their nature, as well as a growing awareness that even texts that claim to have a nonfictional status are highly structured or ‘emplotted’ in a way similar to that of fictional texts (see Cohn 1999: vii, 8; Segal 2002: 699).¹ From a postmodernist perspective, historical meaning is the result of the inextricable unity of content and form, so that the study of historical reality can only happen through the analysis of texts. So it has been stated that “history is inaccessible to us except in textual forms” (Jameson 1981: 82), “history as a *sign* has lost all meaning and [...] it no longer refers to anything outside itself” (Lucy 1997: 42), or that “history and literature are discourses which construct rather than reflect, invent rather than discover the past” (Currie 1998: 88). This, Linda Hutcheon suggests, is “a typically postmodern transgressing of previously accepted limits”; what used to be separate genres are now being merged into each other: “The borders between literary genres have become fluid: who can tell anymore what the limits are between the novel and the short story collection [...], the novel and the long poem [...], the novel and history [...], the novel and biography?” (1988: 9). Still, Hutcheon is careful enough to stress that in this generic boundary-crossing it is not the question of any “simple, unproblematic merging,” but very much of the consciousness of and experiments with existing literary conventions and practices. Her subsequent reference to Mailer’s self-reflexive juxtaposition between ‘history’ and ‘the novel’ in *The Armies of the Night* treats this procedure as a sign of postmodernist poetics, and I will return to this example later in my thesis.

Somewhat symptomatically, however, the typical (and still fashionable) postmodernist and poststructuralist parlance of the 1980s blurs the distinction not only between fictional and nonfictional texts but also that between fiction and *reality*. Barbara Foley critically charts the ideas – popular among contemporary theorists and novelists (e.g., E.L. Doctorow) alike – according to which “[f]iction is a kind of history, history is a kind of fiction” and which emphasize “the superior explanatory power of ‘lies’ over ‘facts’”

¹ A sign of this philosophical scepticism can be grasped in playful questions like “the distinction between fiction and nonfiction – is that fiction or nonfiction?” (Lang 1990: 169; cf. Cohn 1999: 2). Compare, however, the following response: “[T]he claim that all representations are by necessity fiction is itself based on a fiction” (Ryan 1997: 179).

(1986: 10). These ideas tally with the approach which claims that “the borderline between nonfictional and fictive discourse is an arbitrary boundary, setting up a false discrimination between fact and imagination” and “*reality is itself a fiction, a text, a linguistic convention*” (ibid.; my emphasis).² This position should, however, be regarded as a sign of naive poststructuralism which ultimately works against Jacques Derrida’s more ethical and referential concerns.³ Deconstructionists following their leader may argue that language by its very nature is circular and can refer only to itself, never to anything outside itself. Therefore, because the language of a text can refer only to other languages and other texts and not to some extratextual reality, the literary work as a whole can always have a multiplicity of meanings. However, even this conception of textuality is not directly associated with the concept of *fictuality*.⁴

² We should note that arguments like these struck Foley as “provocative but also profoundly unsatisfactory” (1986: 14). In any case, she further argues that “the documentary novel constitutes *a distinct fictional kind*” and that “it purports to represent reality by means of *agreed-upon conventions of fictionality*, while grafting onto its *fictive pact* some kind of additional claim to empirical validation” (ibid.: 25; my emphases). Foley reaches these conclusions rather simply by seeing Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night* and Doctorow’s *Ragtime* as similar kinds of “documentary fictions.” Like Foley, Lars Ole Sauerberg in his study *Fact into Fiction* also merges together the various works representing “documentary realism” (from James Michener’s *Texas* to Capote’s *In Cold Blood*) and places them under the extremely general label “narrative fiction” (see 1991: vii; cf. Hartsock 2000: 257).

³ While Derrida’s reading of literary texts is an ultimately “textual” practice, he does not claim that reality itself is a textually constructed *fiction*. In fact, the problem of the referent is constant in Derrida’s philosophical discussion, including his famous (and often misused) catch-phrase “there is nothing outside the text” or “there is no outside-text” (*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*). This phrase occurs in the context where Derrida reads Rousseau’s *Confessions* and where he states that reading “cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.)” and that “our reading must be intrinsic and remain within the text” (1976 [1967]: 158-159). Actually, then, Derrida is here speaking about reading texts and claiming that there is nothing else than the text when we read; he is not claiming that we actually live inside a fiction, a text, or a linguistic convention, as some fashionable postmodernists have claimed. However, I do not agree with Derrida that all texts are equally ‘textual’ or that the experience of reading happens only on a textual level. As an autobiographical narrative, Rousseau’s text may construct a reading experience that is different from the reading experience of a purely fictional narrative. As is well known, Derrida aims to deconstruct binary oppositions like fiction/nonfiction which he sees an inherent part of Western metaphysics and logocentrism. Still, this large philosophical project has relatively little relevance in the pragmatics of literary production and reception, where fiction and nonfiction are conventionally distinguished from each other.

⁴ This conception of textuality does not directly mean, then, that we need to “cast the shadow of fictivity over all supposedly factual or objective discourse by arguing that an unavoidably figurative (literary) dimension exists all along the continuum of linguistic expression in whatever domain” (Reed 1992: 3). Of course, poststructuralist notions in-

As theorists of nonfiction are themselves ready to admit and sometimes even eager to emphasize (so as to preempt the fiercest attacks on their – our – would-be “positivism”), “there is an enormous gap between any event and any linguistic version of that event” (Heyne 1987: 488-489), and “any literary text, whether fiction or nonfiction, [...] is arbitrated or ‘crafted’ in important ways, rendering impossible the simple equation of ‘actuality’ with nonfiction” (Lehman 1997: 7; cf. Ryan 1997: 166). This is merely a pragmatic notion, foregrounding the nonfiction writer’s considerable problems in “transforming” actual events into literary texts; it does not pay lip service to the serious poetics of nonfiction. It should be stressed, then, that a work of literary nonfiction as a linguistic and textual artifact is no more ‘real’ than a work of fiction. Richard Walsh gives justice to the complexity of the issue when suggesting that “the categorical difference between real and imagined events is overwhelmed by the artificiality of narrative representation in either case” (2003: 111; cf. Ryan 1997: 180). The reading of literary texts (fictions or nonfictions), especially on the basis of structuralist notions, “turns into a study of the *semiotic* process in the creation and organization of *signs*”; and instead of simply corresponding to the actual realities which could be transformed into a text, “writing becomes a highly ritualized activity that pivots on certain conventions recognized by writer and reader alike” (Furst 1992a: 10). In fact, after both the blindness and the insight provided by the main deconstructionists (such as Paul de Man) concerning these issues – the connections between textuality, figural language, reference illusion, and fictionality – the crucial questions still remain as to what makes texts literary, narrative, fictional or nonfictional.⁵

Apparently, one of the seminal texts in the equation between historical and fictional narrative is Roland Barthes’s much-quoted essay “The Discourse of History” (1967), written quite precisely between the historical

volve “the use of variants of rhetorical analysis to uncover a fictive, figural dimension in discourses and disciplines previously based on nonfictive claims (i.e., Derrida shifting the concerns of philosophy from the plane of semantics to that of semiotics, or Foucault shifting the question of history from facts and figures to the figuration of facts via discursive practices)” (ibid.).

⁵ Cf. de Man’s notion in his *Blindness and Insight*: “All literatures [...] have always designated themselves as existing in the mode of fiction. [...] The self-reflecting mirror effect by means of which a work of fiction asserts, by its very existence, its separation from empirical reality [...] characterizes the work of literature in its essence” (1971: 17). However, this kind of “self-reflecting mirror effect” – even though it emphatically does assert the text’s separation from empirical reality – is not a necessary index or proof of the text’s fictionality; more likely, it is a sign of self-reflexivity in literary nonfiction as well. According to Dorrit Cohn, de Man “applies the term [fiction] to underline the dichotomy between written artifacts and factual experience” (1999: 7).

movements of structuralism and poststructuralism and leading, for its part, the way to the latter. Here Barthes analyzes historical writing as a form of discourse, ultimately attempting to establish that there is no distinction between historical and fictional narrative. This is simply because on the level of formal shifters and thematic structures historical narratives do not really differ “from imaginary narrative, as we find it in the epic, the novel, or the drama” (1986 [1967]: 128). By leaning on a constructivist notion of language, Barthes argues that because the discourse of history cannot reach *the real*, it produces an altogether similar kind of “reality effect” (*l’effet de réel*) as fictional/imaginative writing. According to Barthes’s conclusion, as summarized here by Lubomír Doležel, “[l]anguage is incapable of referring to anything outside itself (the world, reality, the past),” and “history borrows narrative from fiction where it is developed; consequently, historical narrative becomes indistinguishable from fictional narrative” (1999: 249). As Gérard Genette points out, however, Barthes’s text, “despite an initial antithesis between ‘historical’ and ‘fictional’ narrative, completely ignores the narrative aspects of historical narrative” (1993 [1991]: 55n; see also Cohn 1999: 118-119). In any case, Barthes’s textuality-based denial of the distinction between fiction and nonfiction (simply focusing on the level of sentence and discourse) has been extremely influential in subsequent postmodernist discussion, and Doležel sees it as “the crux of the postmodernist challenge” towards those who aim at maintaining the distinction.

Let me stress here, with deliberate simplification, that what is often implied in certain deconstructionist, poststructuralist and postmodernist readings (and sometimes made explicit in them) is a “logic” according to which there is either a fixed truth in linguistic representation or there is no truth at all; either all texts are truth-functional or all texts are equally fictive. This kind of non-pragmatic *pragmatism*, partly representing “post-structuralist antifoundationalism,” bases itself upon “a strict either/or logic: either language describes the world or language constructs the world; either there is transcendent Truth or there is no truth; either there are facts outside of discourse or discourse creates facts and truths” (Phelan 1996: 15). As James Phelan notes here, the pragmatist either/or logic inadequately captures the complexity of the relationship between facts, hypotheses, and theories, or between texts, interpretations, and approaches. An example of this inadequacy would be Phyllis Frus’s reading of *The Executioner’s Song*. According to Frus, Mailer’s book is “overt about its fictional status,” reinforcing “the fact that signs refer to other signs, not to an external reality.” Thus “we cannot see [these] crucial differences [between nonfiction novels] if we insist on the separation of literary and fictional texts from nonfiction,

nonliterary ones and regard the nonfiction novel as a genre that faithfully reproduces ‘the real’” (1994: 185, 189, 194). Because of her “textual formalism” and her way of deconstructing “artificial boundaries” between textual types and reading conventions, Frus seems to represent the postmodern cultural relativism that sees all textual representations as equally discursive (cf. Lehman 1997: 4-5). She takes an implied position that because no text (not even a purportedly nonfictional one) can faithfully reproduce the real, this means that all texts are fictional.

What we find here is a kind of logic which is based on the premise of the universal “literariness” of knowledge acquisition and representation and which stresses the supposedly literary/fictive features of historical writing (e.g., emplotment, poetic and rhetorical tropes and figures, semantic indeterminism, ambiguity, and so on). However, as Doležel puts it, only if we think that all language use is poetic, non-referential or self-referential, does the opposition between fictional and nonfictional texts disappear (see 1998b: 792).⁶ Therefore, only if we hold on to the typical deconstructionist notion according to which literature functions mainly (or only) on the level of writing, *écriture*, can we wipe out the pragmatic conventions and communicative aims which distinguish one textual type from another.⁷ Still, we should also emphasize the importance of nonfiction’s communicative aims and its truth claims which are connected to actual readings:

But if the truth of nonfiction cannot be guaranteed, the purely extensional concept of truth as correspondence can be replaced with the intentional concept of claiming truth. The “language game” of nonfiction is not defined by the objective relation of

⁶ As Jane Tompkins concludes in her essay on textuality, morality, and the problem of history, “arguments about ‘what happened’ have to proceed much as they did before post-structuralism broke in with all its talk about language-based reality and culturally produced knowledge” (1985: 76). Tompkins’s discussion is ethical in its argument that it is not a trivial issue how the history of “Indians,” or Native Americans, is represented in textual form.

⁷ We may note that Ann Banfield’s influential (but much criticized) linguistic theory tries to sever the connection between language and communication by dispensing with “the hold of the communicative intent over language guaranteed by the dominance of speech over writing” (1982: 17). However, as Jonathan Culler, among others, argues, literature is not simply *writing* – so that every text is equally figural, metaphorical, and non-referential – but “[m]any instances of language are firmly situated in the circuit of communication” and different textual types and modes (fiction, poetry, history, journalism) call upon different conventions of reading (see 1975: 133). As Stein Haugom Olsen puts it, “literary texts can be given no special status in the deconstructionist scheme since all texts turn out to have the type of rhetorical features which deconstructionist analyses can capture” (1987: 207). From the viewpoint of literary *practice* and communication it may be reasonable to emphasize deconstruction’s problematic assumptions concerning the nature of language and communication.

the text to the world, but by rules that govern the use of the text, and bind sender and receiver in a communicative contract (Ryan 1997: 166).

This definition, which I too am eager to endorse, excludes any *internal* truthfulness of factual/nonfictional texts from the discussion and also problematizes the rather fruitless binary distinction between fiction and nonfiction. Therefore, it is not my contention in this study that nonfiction is a “serious” and “truthful” mode of discourse opposed to fiction as a “non-serious” and “untruthful” mode of discourse.

In John Keener’s words, “a new model is needed, one that acknowledges *common sense* distinctions between fictive and historical discursive modes” (2001: 7; my emphasis).⁸ From the viewpoint of a pragmatically oriented poetics there is, actually, a rather serious fault line in Hayden White’s well-known reasoning that when a historian “emplots” historical events in order to construct a particular meaning, “this is essentially a literary, that is to say fiction-making, operation” (1978: 85). According to semantics, White’s conclusion (“that is to say”) is illogical, as has been shrewdly noted by a host of philosophically oriented literary theorists. Doležel, for instance, argues that the double equation “plot structuring = literary operation = fiction-making” is arrived at by a simple, non-analytical substitution of seeming synonyms, so that “the equating of history and fiction is smuggled into the postmodernist paradigm by a tautology” (1999: 251). As Marie-Laure Ryan argues from a similar viewpoint, the result of this type of thinking will be an idea of “universal fictionality,” which rests on a faulty syllogism: “All fictions are artifices. All representations are artifices. Hence, all representations are fictions” (1997: 180). Doležel, then, sees it as problematic to announce, first, that ‘literary’ making simply means ‘fiction-making,’ or, second, to claim that “the aim of the writer of a novel must be the same as that of the writer of history,” because “both wish to provide a verbal image of ‘reality’” (White 1978: 122; see Doležel 1998b: 791). As Monika Fludernik notes, the recent catch phrase which exposes historiography as ‘also fiction’ since it employs ‘fictional techniques’ needs to be used with great care “lest it result in an indiscriminate equation of historical and novelistic texts” (1996: 41). Still, both Barthes’s analysis of the discourse of history and White’s notion of

⁸ It can be argued, then, that “some oppositions – between fact and fiction, for instance – describe very real (and, I believe, necessary) cognitive operations, in which actual historical people engage and have engaged” (Foley 1986: 35). As mentioned above, there is no need to construct traditional binary oppositions between imaginative fictions and factual histories, but it is important to note that contemporary novelists and journalists continue in their own work to invoke discursive contracts that are decidedly either fictional *or* nonfictional (see *ibid.*: 14).

the fiction-like narrativity of historiography have had a strong influence on contemporary discussion of fiction and nonfiction, even though their main premises rest on rather shaky ground.⁹

Focusing mainly on formal features and on the shared aims of prose fiction and historical writing, the so-called *metahistorical* debates have recently shown the extent to which the discourse of the historian and that of the novelist resemble each other, so that histories as texts share fundamental traits and assumptions with fictional texts (see Nünning 1998: 548; Sauerberg 2001: 92). According to White's viewpoint, historical narratives are also "verbal fictions," and, consequently, "[v]iewed simply as verbal artifacts histories and novels are indistinguishable from each other" (1978: 29, 122). Narratologists who defend the distinction of fiction would emphatically disagree at this point, since they emphasize actual *formal* differences between textual modes. On the other hand, White's sound-bite formulation needs much further pondering, beginning with the question whether we should view histories and novels "simply as verbal artifacts" in the first place. As I would define it, then, the main problem with White's theories about history as narrative and narrative as fiction may be traced back to his emphasis upon formal categories and definitions which exclude many pragmatic, referential, and contextual questions from his discussion.¹⁰ In recent criticism the fiction/nonfiction distinction appears to be more *pragmatic* (dealing with conventions, contexts, and reading/writing practices) than *textual* (which would call for narrative, rhetorical, and linguistic patterns), because on the textual level fiction and nonfiction may sometimes look alike. Consequently, "the relationship between fiction and history [nonfiction] 'is never purely formal'; it is, primarily, a semantic and pragmatic opposition" (Doležel 1999: 265; cf. Sternberg 1985: 30). Still, I believe that some formal criteria need to be taken into account, since nonfictional narratives do not function in exactly the same ways as fictional narratives, and narrative techniques always influence our reading of different texts.

⁹ Bo Pettersson mentions, rather disapprovingly, this "marxistically-informed (post-)structuralist heritage," evident in the theories of Barthes, Foucault, Jameson, and White, "on whom recent literary scholars have grounded their constructivist views and negative interpretations of realist narrative" (1999a: 5).

¹⁰ As Cohn, defending the formal distinction between fiction and nonfiction, argues, "White expressly blocks out the referential level of historical narrative" (1999: 114). Compare also a Finnish theorist writing from a more historiographical perspective: "[O]ne would commonsensically be tempted to think that because of the differing intentions behind the process of writing we could find textual differences in the finished products [historical and fictional narratives] themselves," and by directly following White in his notions of "literariness" and "fictionality" of historical narratives, "we are easily led to overlook the importance of the different assumptions involved in the production of different kinds of texts" (Pihlainen 2002: 39, 43).

Narrative Modes and Borderline Cases

In her book *The Distinction of Fiction*, Dorrit Cohn argues that fiction must be distinguished from nonfiction on the basis of its unique cultural status and unique textual and formal features. Cohn is one of the critics who deliberately searches for formal and textual distinctions between fiction and nonfiction while uneasily retracing “the vanishing boundaries between fictional and nonfictional narrative” (1999: 39). When defending the idea that there are some “fiction-specific signals [that] may be found within texts themselves,” Cohn aims at delineating different *signposts* of fictionality (see *ibid.*: 110, 131). According to her, there are three such signposts: 1) the synchronic *bi-level (story/discourse) model*, related to fiction as a nonreferential narrative; 2) certain prominent *narrative modes* (especially the presentation of consciousness) which characterize fiction’s freedom from real-life constraints; and 3) the doubling of the narrative instance into *author and narrator* (as opposed to the identity between author and narrator in nonfiction).

However, it has been argued that Cohn’s signposts exist not on the textual level but rather on the level of the communicative relationship between author and reader, and that in different communicative frameworks the same textual elements can be read and interpreted in different ways. In this sense, *formal* distinctions between fiction and nonfiction (like historical fiction and historiography) are “much more relative, tentative, and context-dependent than [Cohn] presents them” (Segal 2002: 703). As William Nelles suggests when discussing one of Cohn’s signposts, the author’s name is not really a formal property of the text being analyzed, and in his view Cohn makes a better point when noting that “we cannot conceive of any one given text as more or less fictional, more or less factual, but [...] we read it in one key or another” (Cohn 1989: 16; 1999: 35). According to Nelles, then, narrative analysis is “contingent upon a reader’s decision to read in a certain way rather than on any formal textual features” (1997: 181n). However, I believe Cohn is right when arguing that certain “fiction-specific techniques” do influence our reading, and consequently narrative analysis is always *also* contingent upon formal textual features.¹¹

¹¹ As the speech-act theory represented by John Searle and others would stress, there are no textual properties, syntactical or semantic, that would identify a text as a work of fiction (see Searle 1979 [1975]: 65-65; Pratt 1977: 88-89). However, Searle’s contention that it would be a mistake to assume that fiction contains illocutionary acts different from those of nonfiction has been regarded as problematic by theorists who defend the distinction of fiction. Cohn cites Searle’s examples which appear to be typically *fiction-specific*

We may note, then, that there is an apparent difference between factual constraints and the more imaginative freedom encountered in fiction, especially as regards the presentation of a human mind. This is because fiction, according to Käte Hamburger's classic phrase, is "the sole epistemological instance where the I-originary (or subjectivity) of a third person *qua* third person can be portrayed" (1973: 83; see also Stanzel 1984: 126; Cohn 1999: 24).¹² Alan Palmer also refers to "the basic reality of our lives that we do not have direct access to the thoughts of other people" (2002: 29). What distinguishes nonfiction from fiction at this point is that nonfiction should include its sources and references and stress how these mental images and inner thoughts of another person have come to the knowledge of the author, whereas in fiction the author is free to invent any thought or vision his or her imaginary character may have. Hence, it is one of the requirements of nonfiction that the thoughts of another person are available to the reporter mainly through narrative acts such as interviews, possible letters, diaries, testimonies, and so on.¹³ These requirements raise a question of an adequate representation of a character's (that is, a real person's) thoughts and actions in a nonfictional narrative, as seen in a reporter's actual work representing an ethics of journalism: "[M]y access to her [the main character's] thoughts was circumscribed by the words in her diary, her scrapbook, her sworn statements [...]. By contrast, *I could access (or create) any thought or scene I wanted to access (or create) in the fictional narrative*" (Lehman 1997: 32; my emphasis). As John Hersey writes in his classic text of American literary journalism, *Hiroshima*, "it would be impossible to say what horrors were embedded in the minds of the children who lived through the day" (1986

pieces of narrated monologue that cannot be "seriously" used outside fiction, that is, in nonfiction, and which consequently disprove Searle's case that there is no fiction-specific textual property (see Cohn 1999: 117). While both theorists make the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, they make it on clearly different grounds – Searle on the "pragmatic" level of making assertions, Cohn on the "poetic" level of language-use and narrative technique. As tentatively suggested in the introduction, my own "poetic-pragmatic" approach to literary nonfiction wishes to take both these levels into consideration.

¹² Obviously, Hamburger's much-quoted paragraph has also been critically responded to. As Thomas Pavel argues, Hamburger's definition is "unconvincing," since, for Pavel, "the narration of the inner thoughts of other individuals *qua* subjects indicates less the fictionality of a text than the activity of the *empathic imagination*, which legitimately and plausibly explores the life of other minds in both fictional and actual contexts" (2000: 536). In the same context, Pavel criticizes Cohn's formal categories; his own emphasis is on a "realist and cognitive orientation" which takes into account the actual world of authors, texts, and readers.

¹³ According to Monika Fludernik, "[t]he experiencer can give expression to his or her own emotions, but others' emotions can only be rendered if these have been expressed verbally to the reporter" (1993: 257). As my following examples from Mailer and Wolfe aim to show, literary nonfiction rather boldly plays with these journalistic rules.

[1946]: 90).¹⁴ In fact, the horrors may be so deeply embedded in those minds that they will never be discovered and explained. In each case (Lehman and Hersey), we see how the reporter conscious both of the rules and their violations makes critical self-reflexion part of his journalistic practice. However, most complex works of literary nonfiction may be self-consciously “novelistic” texts playing with the possibilities of fictional devices or at least with devices traditionally understood as ‘fictional.’ One of the most problematic of these devices, especially when it is employed in nonfiction, appears to be *free indirect discourse (FID)*, a narrative technique in which the narrator’s and the character’s voice and viewpoint are ambiguously merged together. Although it has become almost a commonplace to argue that instances of free indirect discourse can be grasped in journalistic, historiographical and other nonfictional texts, the most theoretically informed contributions to this matter still maintain the division between fictional and factual representations.¹⁵ Below, in reference to two prominent works of American literary nonfiction/journalism, I use FID as an example of the ‘fictionalization’ of nonfiction.¹⁶

In formalist-structuralist narratology, traditionally focusing on works of literary fiction, free indirect discourse is often associated with the use of a specific ‘imaginative’ technique in order to evoke the minds and consciousnesses of “imaginary beings.” In a way, the basic “unnaturalness” of presenting other people’s minds is made *natural* in fiction through the use of *artificial* techniques. In her earlier book, *Transparent Minds*, Cohn argues that “the special life-likeness of narrative fiction [...] depends on what writers and readers know least in life: how another mind thinks, another body

¹⁴ Hersey himself has later criticized more (post)modernist efforts, where fact and fiction become blurred, especially Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song*, in relation to which Hersey said that “nothing should be invented” (see Fishkin 1985: 209; Foley 1986: 15n). However, Hersey belongs to the *New Yorker* school of American journalism, with its belief in a journalist’s objectivity. Hersey’s requirement that “the journalist must not invent” is obviously a correct description of conventional journalistic practice but it does not characterize those nonfiction experiments which challenge existing conventions in innovative ways (see Heyne 1987: 485).

¹⁵ While “[i]t can be shown readily enough that FID has been common in newspaper writing, [...] and in journalistic or quasi-journalistic interviews and narratives [...], in the end [...] FID, if it is not *exclusively* literary, is at least *characteristic* of the fictional” (McHale 1978: 282-283). Compare also, for example, Genette (1993 [1991]: 65-66; 79) and Cohn, who actually argues that devices like FID “remain unavailable to narrators who aim for referential (nonfictional) presentation” (1999: 16). Pavel even suggests that “to be sure, they [historians] do not use free indirect discourse” (1992: 27; my emphasis). Fludernik, on the other hand, finds FID not only in literary fictions; she maintains that FID is used extensively in newspaper articles, scientific prose, historical writing and all kinds of journalism (see 1993: 31-32, 92-93). See also Palmer (2004: 61).

¹⁶ This discussion is partly based on an earlier essay of mine (Lehtimäki 2003).

feels” (1978: 5-6). Elsewhere, she notes that only literary fiction “conveys the intimate subjective experiences of its characters, the here and now of their lives to which no real observer could ever accede in real life” (1999: 24). One of Cohn’s examples here is Tolstoy’s mimetic representation of a dying consciousness in *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch*. Fiction’s specific power, therefore, is “to portray the operation of other minds in their very otherness, that is, to make us humans aware of the inner life other humans” (Pavel 2000: 524; cf. Palmer 2004: 9-10). The “unnatural” (or “super-natural”) aspects of fiction actually carry a considerable cognitive power, since fiction can represent human consciousness in a way that cannot be portrayed in any “natural” discourse. However, the cognitive approach to narrative focuses precisely on various “natural” modes of discourse, including realistic, oral, and factual narratives. In addition, recent cognitive approaches to narratology often emphasize the very ambiguity and indeterminacy of narrative discourse which consequently requires the reader’s *interpretative* activity.¹⁷

While *The Executioner’s Song* is based on a large amount of documentary materials, especially on taped interviews of real-life people, it displays self-conscious novelistic and “fictionalizing” techniques as well. Actually, the most “questionable” section in this extremely long narrative – at least according to some critics who have tried to challenge the factual status of the book – might well be Mailer’s representation of the strongly subjective, drug-filled mind of Nicole Baker’s younger sister April just before Gary Gilmore commits his murders:

It got her to the point where her personal motor turned again as if Satan was running her body, and pulling in all the people who usually floated around as personalities from Mars and Venus. The black man was staring at her with his cold black eye, and the white man had started acting like he was ecstasy in the worst way in the entire galaxy. The guitar needed a new string to attract more harmonious spirits. “I,” said April to Gary, “am the one swinging on the string.” She nodded, careful not to do it so hard that the galloping horse would snap her neck (ES 220; my emphases).

¹⁷ Manfred Jahn, for example, proposes a “contextualized reading” of and a “context-sensitive approach” to FID, for the mode cannot be grasped on a purely linguistic level, for instance, on the basis of isolated sentences (see 1992: 357, 364). However, the emphasis on problems of reading and interpreting the occurrences of FID is an inherent part of more classical accounts as well: “There is of course no question of FID in a given context [...] unless it can be recognized by the reader and interpreted appropriately” (McHale 1978: 264). In her study *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction*, Fludernik emphasizes contextual and pragmatic approaches to FID, especially “general cognitive constraints, such as the reader’s prior assumption of textual cohesion,” and attempts to delineate “how [FID] materializes in the reading process” (1993: 439, 441; my emphasis; see also Jahn 1997: 451).

While it is quite impossible to know what is going on in April's mind (the black man; the white man; the guitar; the galloping horse), we may conclude that this representation of a character's consciousness is a conscious *fictionalization* (as Mailer himself has emphasized [see Fishkin 1985: 210]). Obviously, ambiguous scenes like these require the reader's interpretation so that their function in the larger narrative can be defined; as I see it, the scene above carries its own clear narrative purpose in its indirect reflection of the demonic spirits which now surround Gilmore. As the narrative focus is attached to April, the whole imagery anticipating the murders is presented as "weird," "warped" and "distorted": "Gary and this fellow Val kept looking at car keys like old magicians studying old dried herbs, *weird!* She wandered around and the room *distorted*. *Warp* was in the atmosphere" (ES 221; my emphases). Even so, Mailer's way of laying bare his penetration into the real-life person's mind, complete with his further reflection upon the fact that he was not able to interview April, is a smaller detour into fictional techniques than Tom Wolfe's "pyrotechnic" employment of FID in his nonfiction classic *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, which represents *mainly* consciousnesses filled with LSD and other drugs.

As Phyllis Frus, for example, argues, certain passages in Wolfe's narrative are "too demonstrably the free indirect discourse of the Pranksters to be Wolfe's attitude toward the stuff," but "neither is this account of the sensations attributable to any single character" (1994: 148). When reading *Acid Test* we may consequently have difficulties in seeing how Wolfe, as a reporter participating in the mystic bus *trip* by Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters, could possibly base his creations of LSD-filled consciousnesses on an actual interview. Rather, there is some idea in arguing that no sensible interviews could have been conducted.¹⁸ What is more clear is that Wolfe, a self-conscious artificer playing with his materials, tries to textually imitate the workings of drugged consciousnesses, their illusion of "total acid understanding":

She keeps coming up to somebody who isn't saying a goddamn thing and looking into his eyes with the all-embracing look of total acid understanding, our brains are one brain, so let's visit, you and I, and she says: "Ooooooooh, you really think that, I know what you mean, but do you-u-u-u-u-u-ueeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee" – finishing off in a sailing tremulo laugh as if she has just read your brain and it is the weirdest of the weird shit ever, your brain eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee –. (Wolfe 1999 [1968]: 83)

¹⁸ Apparently, this "mind-reading" technique is contextualized and "naturalized" in the book since the use of LSD is able to produce the experience of "intersubjectivity" from Kesey's viewpoint: "Marvelous! He could truly *see into people* for the first time –" (1999 [1968]: 42). However, Wolfe's own attitude toward his subject(s) is not only ambiguous but somehow ironic as well.

As Wolfe himself argues in his often-cited introduction to *The New Journalism*, the choice of the point of view is one of the crucial questions in journalistic practice. The practice of the “new journalism” also makes this technique visible, employing it (according to Wolfe) in a deliberately novelistic vein. As Wolfe puts it, his own nonfictional technique comes close to the point-of-view and “centre-of-consciousness” devices developed by Henry James: as the author-narrator-reporter, he is able to enter “directly into the mind of a character, experiencing the world through his central nervous system throughout a given scene” (1973: 19). Apparently, it is these fiction-like techniques and devices which have attracted the attention of nonfiction criticism, for quite clearly there are both poetic and ethical problems in some of Wolfe’s more innovative and experimental uses of his new journalistic tools. It seems that Wolfe would want both to define nonfiction as a distinct literary practice (differing from fiction, that is) and still maintain that nonfiction is able to use the same means and techniques as fiction in order to produce similar effects (cf. Ryan 1997: 170-171). He is aware of the fact that the new journalists “would be accused of ‘entering people’s minds’”; nevertheless, he argues, “specific devices, such as using scenes and dialogue in a ‘novelistic’ fashion” would broaden and deepen the area of journalism (see 1973: 22, 32). If we relate this discussion to Wolfe’s own practice in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, as in the paragraph cited above, his way of presenting his real-life characters’ consciousnesses blends “creation” and “documentation” rather *too* ambiguously. Richard Walsh argues from a pragmatic viewpoint, however, that “the presence of free indirect discourse in a nonfictional narrative will probably strike contemporary readers as a liberty, but this does not make the text a fiction (in fact, it confirms their interpretative orientation towards it as nonfiction)” (2003: 115). I believe that Walsh has a point here; as I would put it, certain “anomalies” in nonfiction produce critical reflection in the reader, but he or she is not likely to see the text as transformed into fiction because of certain liberties it takes.¹⁹

Wolfe’s “hybrid” text, perhaps even more than any of Mailer’s works of nonfiction, represents a self-conscious blurring and merging of both literary genres and narrative techniques – which still does not mean that *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* should be read as fiction. In Walsh’s words,

¹⁹ Phelan also maintains that despite various experiments with nonfiction by Wolfe and others, some significant differences between fiction and nonfiction remain. For instance, theoretical formulations “do not mean to rule out, say, the use of simultaneous present in nonfictional narrative but rather to emphasize that *such a technique will achieve its effect in part by its deviation from the norm* – and to suggest that the effect is likely to be different from the effect of the present tense in fictional narrative” (1994: 230; my emphasis).

“there are indeed many specific texts, or generic hybrids, from nonfiction novel to fictional memoir, in which the rhetorical scope of fictionality is curtailed: Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* confines its use of the rhetoric of fictionality to certain stylistic and narratorial liberties” (2003: 111-112). Nevertheless, from the vantage point of formalist narratology, specific *formal* hybrids have been regarded as “aesthetic misfortunes,” as non-narratologist Harold Bloom phrases it. A still prevailing “bipolar approach to narrative,” which sees the fictional and the factual as antithetical poles, “has shown little awareness of the nonfiction novel as a literary genre, treating books like [Mailer’s *Armies*] as literary anomalies” (Zavarzadeh 1976: vii).²⁰ According to a traditional aesthetic stance represented by, for instance, René Wellek, in twentieth-century literature “the worship of the document has suggested many attempts to produce hybrid forms such as the ‘factography’ of the Russians in the twenties, Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, and Norman Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night*.” Wellek regards such narratives as works of “reportage” which use fictional devices but claim to be either ‘nonfictional novels’ or ‘collective novels’ – “paradoxical names for fictions based on documents or personal experiences.” For Wellek, “these hybrid forms show our thirst for facts or possibly the drying up of imagination, the assimilation of much literature to journalism, reporting or historiography” (1982: 27-28). John Hartsock sees a formalist and New Critical bias in the notion that there is a perceived lack of “formal patterns” in the works of literary nonfiction (see 2000: 8). However, when speaking of an in-between mode in the case of literary nonfiction, we are not necessarily speaking of hybrid narratives with obscurely blurred effects. For example, the concept of *documentary literature* has usually been understood “as intermediate between artistic and nonartistic discourse,” but by adopting the term ‘documentary prose’ Leona Toker suggests that it is not the question of any in-between form but of “multifunction objects” (1997: 188). The concept of documentary prose can be adapted to some nonfictional genres, such as biographies and memoirs, which need to be studied “as a *form of art*,” and whose style and structure differ from common, non-literary documents. Documentary prose – or literary nonfiction in my scheme – constructs a *motivated* and symbolically coherent narrative structure, creating “the pattern of motifs within the text” (ibid.: 213). I will analyze these effects

²⁰ In her biography of Mailer, when discussing *The Armies of the Night* Mary Dearborn argues that “[a]t the very least, [Mailer] had invented a new genre, a form of narrative that questioned the boundaries between fiction and history,” and “as a ‘nonfiction novel’ [...], it was a very new *beast*” (1999: 235, 247; my emphasis). Robert Merrill also asks “what kind of *animal*” that book is (1992: 115; my emphasis).

more closely in my readings of Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*.

As suggested above, in the field of narratological poetics the “nonfiction novel,” often regarded as a hybrid form, has apparently remained precisely a kind of “beast” or “animal.” Accordingly, Cohn, representing classical, formalist-structuralist narratology in her distinction between fiction and nonfiction, refers implicitly to Mailer's practices, such as his self-conscious generic subtitles:

The New Journalists of the seventies may, I think, be regarded as a postmodern reincarnation of the New Biographical trend, though they are far more self-conscious of their purpose. Some have actually laid claim to the creation of a new literary form that wipes out for good and all the antiquated distinction between factual and fictional writing. But a look at the oxymoronic subtitles featured on the title pages of these newer crossbreeds – True Life Novel, Novel Biography, Nonfiction Novel – makes it clear that they were largely written and read for their transgressive shock value. Closer study would confirm that their fictionalizing devices boil down principally to the consistent application of focalizing technique – sometimes in stream-of-consciousness form – to real-life sport heroes, rock stars, and convicted murderers. In this perspective, biographies that act like novels, far from erasing the borderline between the two genres, actually bring the line that separates them more clearly into view (1999: 28-29; my emphases).

Here Cohn argues that “closer study” would clarify to us that the self-conscious claim to “the creation of a new literary form” (literary nonfiction and its variants) stands on a shaky ground, as we may already grasp by looking at the “oxymoronic subtitles” of these borderline cases. Apparently, while this characterization may aptly capture the modes of many a fictional/factual narrative, largely produced and consumed in the form of a mass-market paperback, there is still much more to Mailer's nonfictional poetics than its “transgressive shock value.” Still, we may note that here the narratologist is emphatically defending the “antiquated” distinction between factual and fictional writing, and while she does it convincingly for a large part of her study (when speaking of Proust's fictional autobiography or Tolstoy's historical fiction, for example),²¹ she does not actually grapple with the most complex cases of literary nonfiction. In fact, another leading narratologist, Gérard Genette, taking a more pragmatic and “realistic” viewpoint on such “transgressions” as the New Journalism, argues that “Dorrit Cohn, faithful to a position that she herself calls ‘separatist,’ considers some of these

²¹ There is, still, a reference in Cohn to “most theoretically informed critics” who have “increasingly resisted the straightforward tagging of [Proust's] *Recherche* as *either* an autobiography *or* a novel, regarding it rather as a generically hybrid creature” (1999: 67).

borderline cases in order to minimize their importance” (1993 [1991]: 83-84n).²² From the viewpoint of formalist poetics, then, certain kinds of self-conscious nonfictional narrative may appear to be anomalies devoid of codified formal qualities. It is precisely because of this liability of the traditional formalist-structuralist stance that we need a new kind of pragmatic and rhetorical poetics which is equipped to deal with a “non-standard” case of literary art somewhere between “pure” modes of fact and fiction.²³

Ways of Fictional and Factual Worldmaking

There are reasons to argue that fiction and nonfiction are read in different ways and that they follow different rules. Thus, there are different *modes of reading* appropriate to fiction and nonfiction, and different contextualizing markers establish the situational context within which the text’s *purpose* is understood (cf. Ryan 2001: 105; Kearns 1999: 35). According to this pragmatic approach, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction does not exist *a priori* on any purely textual level, but what counts is the official status of the text and its reading horizon (see Genette 1993 [1991]: 57).

²² Compare also the seminal *Poetics Today* issue 11:4 (1990), which includes both Cohn’s “Signposts of Fictionality: A Narratological Perspective” and Genette’s “Factual Narrative, Fictional Narrative.” We may contend that a new phase in formalist narratology’s focus on the fiction/nonfiction distinction started here, in a way preceded by Cohn’s now almost canonical article “Fictional versus Historical Lives: Borderlines and Borderline Cases” (1989), and followed by the discussion, especially influenced by Cohn, in the essays by Lützeler (1992), Pavel (1992), and Carrard (1997). See also the monographs *The Distinction of Fiction* (Cohn 1999) and *Fiction & Diction* (Genette 1993 [1991]), which include revised versions of the two above-mentioned essays. Referring to these two essays which were “conceived simultaneously and independently,” Cohn still maintains that “Genette tends to draw the line between fictional and nonfictional narrative rather less firmly” than she does (1999: 125n).

²³ In his analysis of Frank McCourt’s autobiographical *Angela’s Ashes* (1996), a narrative working against general formal categories in its employment of an *unreliable* nonfictional narration, Phelan argues: “As accomplished narratologists, Fludernik and Cohn are always aware of the potential difference between an author and narrator, but each of them is interested in finding formal features that distinguish fiction from nonfiction. Consequently, they describe the standard case of nonfiction narrative and overlook the nonstandard case represented by *Angela’s Ashes*” (2005: 67). Here we are apparently confronting one of the differences between formalist narratology and the rhetorical theory of narrative, the former emphasizing formal distinctions as more or less fixed and the latter focusing rather on individual narratives and on the specific, often peculiar “effects” that they have on their readers. Phelan believes that “there is no one-to-one correspondence between any formal feature of a narrative and any effect,” and he doubts that “we can make the distinction on the basis of techniques that are sure markers of fiction or nonfiction or that appear exclusively in one” (ibid.: 68). As the examples of nonfictional narrative like McCourt’s (or Mailer’s in my scheme) visibly suggest, “[a]s soon as [such]

Emphatically, however, there need to be some practical reasons to construct a notion of the text's "official status" and its "reading horizon" in the first place. Thus, we should reflect upon the reciprocal relationship between the text's specific aims and the reader's expectations and reading conventions. As Richard Walsh argues, "a rhetorical definition of fictionality is pragmatic, in that its criteria are not ultimately inherent in the narrative itself, but are contextual." On this basis, then, "*the distinction between fiction and nonfiction* rests upon the rhetorical use to which a narrative is put, which is to say, the kind of *interpretative response* it invites in being presented as one or the other" (2003: 115-116; my emphases). Walsh's position, with its implied critique of Cohn's formal distinctions, actually summarizes the pragmatic standpoint. In this section, I discuss semantic, pragmatic, and referential distinctions between fiction and nonfiction, also focusing on the *possible-worlds theory*, which distinguishes between the worlds of fiction and nonfiction.

Referentiality, Ethics, and the Representation of Reality

From the viewpoint of speech-act theory, nonfiction is a practice of making assertions. An assertion is a type of "illocutionary" act that conforms to certain quite specific semantic and pragmatic rules, like that of committing oneself to the truth of the expressed proposition and that of being in a position to provide evidence or reasons for the truth of the expressed proposition. What counts are certain quite specific semantic and pragmatic rules that nonfiction needs to follow. Therefore, when a sentence is uttered in a *nonfictional* context, the pragmatic rules governing its use are in effect, and the hearer is entitled to make certain assumptions concerning the speaker's intent (see Ryan 1991: 61). For instance, historical writing consists of "representations of past actuality" and "the claim to be a true representation is understood by both writer and reader" (Carpenter 1995: 1). However, a *fictional* "utterance" does not mean a commitment to the truth of the expressed proposition, and consequently the writer of fiction is not committed to being able to provide evidence for its truth (see Searle 1979 [1975]: 62-

techniques get identified, some narrative artist will use them for unanticipated effects" (ibid.). Compare also Susan Suleiman's remark that McCourt's narrative is, in its style of writing, very close to a novel: "[N]o reader can be unaware of [such] literary artifice and patterning – and yes, invention – in this work; yet *Angela's Ashes* is internationally recognized as a memoir, recounting events that really happened during the author's impoverished childhood" (2000: 545).

63).²⁴ As Stein Haugom Olsen argues in another context, "[i]t is, of course, possible to take the position that a literary work can have both truth-value and aesthetic value, but that the two are not interconnected" (1978: 74). For example, it would be shortsighted to connect the "goodness" or the "badness" of a literary work strictly with its truth value.

The imaginative freedom of fiction cannot be allowed to texts which present themselves as nonfiction and claim to be factual, thus being attached to truth-conditionality.²⁵ As noted before, any narrative text contains bits and pieces of *invention*, but that does not logically turn all texts into fictions. As Mailer has suggested in an interview concerning *The Executioner's Song*, the processes of nonfictional production, and the author's involvement in it, are deliberately distinct from practices of fiction: "[T]he one thing that nonfiction calls for is understanding – clear understanding of what's being said. It's hard to think of a good book of nonfiction whose waters are not clear. Whereas I think in fiction, what we want to do is we want to create life" (Lennon [ed.] 1988: 243-244). While Mailer here aims at distinguishing the working processes of nonfiction from imaginative creations possible in fiction, he concludes by implying that his "true life novel" about Gary Gilmore is a kind of in-between-mode, a novel written with constraints of nonfiction, and thus not an "imaginative novel": "Now the fact that these are real people and I attempted to be as scrupulous as I could to what happened – subject to the limitations of journalism – means only that this is a novel which is not an imaginative novel, which did not come out of my imagination" (ibid.: 244). In his Afterword to *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer foregrounds his material production of nonfictional narrative as follows:

²⁴ From his clear pragmatic and semantic definitions Searle proceeds to somewhat more problematic assertions. He suggests, for instance, that the writer of fiction is *pretending* to make an assertion. Searle's emphasis on fiction as a "non-serious" speech act (which means that the author is not committed to the truthfulness of his or her assertions) and his reference to fiction-making as a kind of play or game makes the art of literary fiction sound rather less important than it is from the viewpoint of poetics. Furthermore, his notions that it is always the author him- or herself who pretends to perform illocutionary acts in fiction or that "most fictional stories contain nonfictional elements [...] and real references" (1979 [1975]: 72) will not stand narratological scrutiny. Searle's essay "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse" is obviously a seminal one, but it has been criticized from various perspectives (e.g., Ryan 1991: 60-66; Lamarque & Olsen 1994: 62-64; Cohn 1999: 117, 126; Pavel 2000: 534-537), including that of Derrida in his well-known confrontation with Searle.

²⁵ As Meir Sternberg argues: "History-writing is not a record of fact – of what 'really happened' – but a discourse that claims to be a record of fact. Nor is fiction-writing a tissue of free inventions but a discourse that claims freedom of invention. The antithesis lies not in the presence or absence of truth value but of the commitment to truth value" (1985: 25).

This book does its best to be a *factual account* [...]. In consequence, *The Executioner's Song* is directly based on interviews, documents, records of court proceedings, and other original material that came from a number of trips to Utah and Oregon. More than one hundred people were interviewed face to face, plus a good number talked to by telephone. The total, before the count was lost, came to something like three hundred separate sessions, and they range in length from fifteen minutes to four hours. [...] It is safe to say that the collected transcript of every last recorded bit of talk would approach fifteen thousand pages. Out of such revelations was this book *built* and the story is as *accurate* as one can *make* it. This does not mean that it has come a great deal closer to *the truth* than the recollections of the witnesses. While important events were corroborated by other accounts wherever possible, that could not, given the nature of the story, always be done, and, of course, *two accounts of the same episode* would sometimes diverge (ES 1051; my emphases).

Here Mailer emphasizes the most crucial aspects of a nonfictional practice: the truth-claim presented here corresponds to factual accuracy based on scrupulous documentation, whereas the truth itself can never be ultimately reached; the text of nonfiction is always “built” and “made” (so that factual materials are transformed into a textual form); and of historical events (especially of public events as dealt with in this book) there is always more than one version and different accounts are sometimes in competition with each other.²⁶

It has been suggested that one of the consequences of the factual status of nonfictional narratives is that it brings into play certain *epistemological* principles, including the questions posed by readers concerning access to information (see Heyne 1987: 484). As Genette notes, the degree to which various subjectivizing constructions are present in nonfictional narratives can be argued about endlessly, and in any case, factual narrative has to “justify every such [psychological] explanation by an indication of its source” (1993 [1991]: 67). The checking of those factual and documentary sources that a nonfictional narrative makes certain claims about cannot be taken as a trivial or hopeless endeavor. Many nonfictions explicitly refer to their sources including scrupulous notes and bibliography (e.g., Mailer’s *Oswald’s Tale*), constructing a kind of “*built-in checking system* through which the reader can determine whether the registered events are indeed actual or are dreamed up by the author for climactic and dramatic effects” (Zavarzadeh

²⁶ In this regard, nonfictions can contest each other about characters, events, and facts in ways that fictions cannot (cf. Phelan 2005: 74). As Eric Heyne puts it, there is never one version of any actual event that is the best for all purposes, and what we usually have is a bunch of competing accounts with different purposes and different forms (see 1987: 486). He refers here to the American political conventions of 1972 as represented by two works of literary nonfiction, Mailer’s *St. George and the Godfather* and Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail ’72*, two different books which cover many of the same events and describe many of the same people.

1976: 220; my emphasis). For example Mailer, in his Afterword to *The Executioner's Song*, considers it meaningful to clarify various requirements and starting points of factuality, because “this work does its best to be a factual account,” and also because of the possible fictionalizing devices that the author has chosen to use.²⁷

From a pragmatic viewpoint, it may be argued that different kinds of *response* are appropriate for fiction and nonfiction, and this is because we take a different stance to fictional statements and factual statements. As it has been proposed, nonfictional texts have a “binary” nature based on authorial intention about factuality and the audience’s response to that factuality. Whereas a fictional text has neither factual status nor factual adequacy, “a nonfiction text has factual status [as intended by the author], but readers would have to resolve individually or by debate the question of its factual adequacy” (Heyne 1987: 481). In fact, Eric Heyne seeks a rather “precise” differentiation between works intended to be read and evaluated as fiction and those intended to be read and evaluated as fact, almost suggesting an either/or opposition which hardly captures the more complex and experimental achievements in the field of literary nonfiction.²⁸ Thus he critically comments on Mas’ud Zavarzadeh’s thesis according to which the “factuality” of our contemporary life has produced narratives that cannot be taken as either factual or fictional but as both simultaneously. As Heyne argues,

²⁷ As noted above, Cohn is quite critical toward such obscure “crossbreeds” that aim at being factual narratives while still using the supposedly fictional techniques, as if trying to “have it both ways” (see 1999: 29). I partly agree with Cohn here. What she does not discuss, however, is that the Mailerian type of literary nonfiction is very self-conscious and even ethical in its “violation” of the rules. This kind of nonfiction is more likely to critically reflect upon the pragmatic fiction/nonfiction distinction than to blur all possible boundaries. When in *The Executioner's Song* Dr. Woods’ “diagnosis” of Gary Gilmore’s personality is largely presented through his own consciousness and even more so, in the form of a dream (see ES 399), this fiction-specific technique is reflected upon in Mailer’s Afterword and actual sources are mentioned: “[It] comes in fact from *an actual interview* [...] and has been placed in *Dr. Woods’ mind* with his kind permission” (ES 1052; my emphases).

²⁸ Heyne’s search for a precise classification is criticized by Daniel Lehman, who points out that the reader can be mistaken about the author’s intention and that the reader cannot be assumed to be able to determine what is real and judge an adequate representation of the real (see 1997: 21). In his review of Lehman’s book, Heyne, for his part, argues that Lehman does not offer much in the way of theoretical insight but substitutes a metaphor, “the edge,” for more demanding theoretical investigation (see 2001: 323). Consequently, Heyne sees that Lehman’s reliance on spatial metaphors (the edge, the gap, the boundary) is not an effective way to characterize nonfiction’s complex operations (see *ibid.*: 326). To my mind, this is quite an adequate critique of the broad and often undefined scope of a rhetorical theory of narrative. The discussion continues with Lehman’s response to Heyne and, again, with Heyne’s reply to Lehman in *Narrative* 9:3 (2001).

Zavarzadeh's ultimate suggestion that in the age of increasingly complex media narratives the fact/fiction distinction should be abandoned is out of tune with our common-sensical and practical ways of distinguishing between fact and fiction in our daily lives. Still, we need to reflect upon the complex question whether self-conscious literary nonfictions challenge readers to change their practices and conventions of reading factual narratives, or, to put it in another way, whether our response to newspaper journalism gets endlessly complicated when we face complex nonfiction "novels" playing at least partly with conventions of literary fiction. Actually, as Heyne himself believes, our "appropriate" response to texts becomes much more complicated when we turn from pieces of factual reportage to longer and more self-consciously literary works of nonfiction.

In addition, when discussing the different aims and purposes of a non-fictional narrative, Heyne notes that "it is essential to understand the exact truth-claims being made and how they fit into the author's overall intentions" (1987: 488). As Lehman argues, however, some writers of nonfiction deliberately raise, through their own "factual-fictional" narratives, endless challenges to those critics who depend primarily on authorial intent for definitions of fact and fiction. In this sense the possible factuality or fictionality of the text cannot be defined only on the basis of authorial intentions and claims (which may be self-consciously complex, as in the case of parody) or through any conventional author-reader "contract." Instead, these questions must be analyzed and contemplated in the context of an individual text's specific means, devices, practices, materiality and referentiality. Some non-fictions are explicitly categorized and labeled "nonfiction" for pragmatic purposes, and this kind of label "remains an important key to how [the text] is written and read and is much more socially constructed and negotiated by both author and reader than derived by some empirical standard of truth" (Lehman 1997: 7). While the author takes the position as the "creator" of the text and the reader as its "consumer," this more or less one-sided communication eventually breaks down in the process of reading, in order to make way for a complex rhetorical relationship between author and reader.²⁹

²⁹ When discussing the difference between fictional and historical narrative, Sternberg reflects upon the different "rules of the writing game." It is a question of a *communicative* transaction, and instead of *a priori* answers concerning the difference between fiction and nonfiction, we need to make *rhetorical* questions: "What kind of contract binds [writer and audience] together? What does the writer stand committed to? What is the audience supposed to assume?" (1985: 26). Sternberg's focus here is on Biblical narratives as historical (nonfictional) ideological texts, complex and ambiguous but posing rhetorical questions different from those of (post)modernist self-reflexive nonfiction of the Mailerian type.

Literary nonfiction appears to be a kind of third mode between the poles of fictional and factual narrative, a mode which cannot be explained by leaning on our conventional criteria for factual (or fictional) discourse. Accordingly, Zavarzadeh speaks of the “bireferential” nature of (post)modernist “nonfiction novel,” which means that these texts combine an *in-referential* creation of a world “mapped out within the book” as well as an *out-referential* “external configuration of facts verifiable outside the book” (1976: 55). What this also means is that we cannot construct a theory of literary nonfiction – as John Hellmann does in his *Fables of Fact* – on the basis of Northrop Frye’s traditional notion that literary texts have some final direction, determined either by relation to the external world or by a form that finally points to itself. According to Frye’s thesis, in principle “centrifugal” or “inward” texts are fictional, and “centripetal” or “outward” texts are nonfictional (see Frye 1957: 73-74; Hellmann 1981: 23-24; Toker 1997: 191, 213; Heyne 2001: 326-327). In Heyne’s words, this model suggests that a text must lose touch with the “external world” insofar as it develops an engaging (that is, literary) form (see 1987: 83). But as Zavarzadeh maintains, the events and people in nonfiction are “actual phenomena in the world accessible to ordinary human senses and, unlike the contents of fictive novels, exist outside the cover of books” (1976: 226). Zavarzadeh’s contention is, then, that bireferential narratives form open and dynamic systems in active tension with the experiential world outside the book.³⁰

Lehman (virtually alone among the critics) values Zavarzadeh’s approach because that model subverts the possibility of a reading in a world removed from the actual as well as forecloses the comfort level that might result from believing that the nonfiction text is unambiguously “true.” However, Lehman wishes to expand Zavarzadeh’s original concept of bireferentiality to the realm of *multireferentiality*, where nonfiction’s relations are always potentially complex, including writer outside text to event, writer through text to event, reader outside text to event, reader through text to event, event arbitrated by text, and text arbitrated by event (see 1997: 35-36).³¹

³⁰ Benjamin Hrushovski constructs a division between “internal field of reference” consisting of a network of interrelated referents like characters, events, situations, dialogues and the like, and “external fields of reference” which mean those reference fields outside the text: “[t]he real world in time and space, history, a philosophy, ideologies, views of human nature, other texts” (1984: 230, 243). In a sense, Hrushovski is here proposing one possible model for a reflexive reading which takes into account both ‘intratextual’ and ‘extratextual’ elements in a given literary text.

³¹ In her discussion of historiographic metafiction Linda Hutcheon also speaks of “multireferentiality,” simultaneously criticizing Zavarzadeh’s theory of “bireferentiality” which for Hutcheon implies a model of binary thinking: “[V]arious referential modes al-

In Cohn's narratological terminology, "the level of reference introduces a diachronic dimension into the *tri-level* model of historical narrative that is absent from the *bi-level* model of fictional narrative" (1999: 115; my emphases). This means that in historical (nonfictional) narrative the transformation of archival and documentary sources into a narrative text is highly constrained and controlled, being subject to the author's justification and the reader's scrutiny. Thus the bi-level model of story/discourse in fictional narrative becomes complicated by the priority of historical and documented events that nonfiction obligatorily refers to.³²

The crucial feature of nonfictional representation is, then, that it aims at *referentiality*. What most clearly distinguishes nonfiction (from fiction) and what characterizes its "powers and problems," is its difficulty to "gain access" to its referent, its object of representation (see Lehman 1997: 25). It should be stressed here that nonfiction's aim to gain access to its referent is always an obligatory and serious aim, an inherent part of nonfictional representation – but there is no such obligatoriness in fictional representation, for fiction always enjoys a certain imaginative freedom concerning referentiality.³³ If nonfiction is partly defined through its *referentiality*, fiction can be defined on the basis of *nonreferentiality*: "[W]hen we speak of the nonreferentiality of fiction, we do not mean that it *can* not refer to the real world

ready exist to deal with fiction and non-fiction, and all tend to be binary. [...] Zavarzadeh regards the nonfiction novel, for example, as 'bi-referential' in that it refers to itself and to reality" (1988: 154). To my mind, however, there is a certain amount of 'panfictionality' in Hutcheon's poetics of postmodernism, as she implies that fiction and nonfiction have similar purposes and that they function on the same level of reality reference.

³² In fact, these notions give Cohn's formalist model a pragmatic side as well. As Thomas Pavel argues, Cohn's distinction between first-person and third-person narratives is also "a pragmatic one, since it belongs to the deictic system that relates the message to the conditions of its production"; furthermore, according to Pavel, Cohn "is interested in differentiating the *reading* of fiction from the *reading* of nonfiction" (1992: 20).

³³ We may construct a clear distinction between *nonfiction* and *realistic fiction* as well. The classic realist novel, for example, is dependent on the authenticity of its illusion and its aesthetics of constructing a coherent (fictional) world model. In a rhetorical sense, "to read a realistic narrative is to submit to an act of persuasion, the aim of which is to convert readers to the belief that '*all is true*'" (Furst 1995: 26). However, to read nonfiction critically and reflexively is to consider, discuss, and even challenge the facts presented – in Lehman's words, to read "over the edge" and take into account "the subject of the narrative across the edge of its boundaries" (1997: 29). Unlike fiction (realistic or not), nonfiction "*forces* negotiation with its referentiality" (ibid.). Bo Pettersson argues that "any referential view is an *interpretation* of the use(s) of narrative: the referential *function* (or the like) has been *deemed* to be central to narrative" (1999a: 7). Pettersson speaks of the epistemological status of literary representation, also emphasizing the referentiality of *fiction*. In my view, in the case of nonfiction the referential function is *always* deemed to be central to narrative, and this basic assumption directs our interpretation of the narrative.

outside the text, but that it *need* not refer to it” (Cohn 1999: 15). In Cohn’s usage, “nonreferentiality” pertains to a work of fiction which itself creates the world to which it refers, and in this way fiction is severed from the actual world. This does not, however, mean that fiction *never* refers to the actual world outside the text.³⁴ In fact, our readerly cognition “naturalizes” the worlds of fiction according to our real-life schemata, but we still need to note that fiction’s references to the world outside the text are not *bound* to accuracy and that fiction does not refer *exclusively* to the real world outside the text (see Fludernik 1996: 34; Cohn 1999: 15). In comparison, however, the reading experience of nonfiction is obligatorily twofold; it is both ‘textual’ and ‘actual,’ since a nonfictional narrative forces the reader into a multireferential reading (cf. Lehman 1997: 36). In Lehman’s model, nonfiction purports to recreate an experience (some original event) that is *potentially* available to the reader outside the text as well.

As Lehman maintains, a strong *double* experience of reading nonfiction derives from the fact that both writer and reader are living and experiencing the textual story and the actual world at the same time. Lehman emphasizes the ethical grounding of his own study, maintaining the idea that “truth matters” and that words have the power to affect other people by hurting or healing (see 1997: ix). The importance of *ethics* (of writing, reading, and representing the world) has, in a special sense, become the center of contemporary literary studies. In fact, “literary and ethical questions have always been related, whether through the ethical nature of literary criticism, or through the use of literary texts to provide the basis for ethical thinking” (Hadfield, Rainsford & Woods 1999: 13; see also Parker 1998: 14). As Wayne Booth argues, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction belongs significantly to the area of ethical criticism: “This difference has important ethical consequences; the powers (and dangers) of history and biography are in some ways stronger and in other ways weaker than those of fictional narrative” (1988: 145; cf. Freedman 1998: 135). Of course, the question of reality, human life, and their representations seems to become an increas-

³⁴ As Searle believes, most fictional stories contain nonfictional elements and real references to actual places, events, and people. Thus, for example, “the Russia of *War and Peace* is the real Russia, and the war against Napoleon is the real war against the real Napoleon” (1979 [1975]: 72). However, fictional characters, places, or events, even though they were “derived” from actual world history, cannot be *subjected* to the requirements of referentiality. What is crucial here is that in *nonfiction* (perhaps even written by the same author) these same characters, places, and events do have a referential function, because “reference requires utterer’s intention” (Olsen 1987: 172). As I will suggest, historical characters such as John F. Kennedy live (and die) on a different reference level in Mailer’s fictional *Harlot’s Ghost* as compared to his nonfictional *Oswald’s Tale*.

ingly complex matter, as already demonstrated by Jean Baudrillard in his much-discussed theory of simulation. Accordingly, fictionalized media representations, audio-visual narratives, manipulation of picture, virtual reality, computer simulations, digital texts and hypertexts, are, in different ways, representations of our world and our reality.³⁵

A highly conscious practice of merging fact and fiction is therefore visible in the forms of written and audio-visual journalism and documentaries, producing “the fashionable combinations of journalistic reportage and fictional invention in newspapers, the experimental use of multiple narrators and points of view in documentary” (Currie 1998: 101). However, as the endless examples of postmodern, audio-visual contaminations of fact with fiction often prove, “[i]t would clearly be catastrophic for democratic values to regard journalism as just another genre of fiction” (Hackett & Zhao 1998: 135). In much of the recent criticism there have been arguments that “unequivocal falsity” is a *truer*, more likely principle than “unequivocal truth,” which is regarded as a sheer impossibility. As Lehman writes, however, “not all manipulated facts are equally false; not all testimony about the past is equally futile; not all honest attempts to tell the truth are identically failed; some knowledge is more incomplete than other knowledge; some perceptions are more slanted than others” (1997: 8). In other words, “even if evidence can be manipulated, even fabricated, the mere fact that the question of its nature and reliability matters to historians demonstrates a fundamental epistemological difference between fiction and history” (Ryan 1997: 179). Thus, even though it would be difficult, and sometimes impossible, to trace an exact boundary between fiction and nonfiction, or truth and falsity, this kind of confession does not mean that the boundary does not matter.

³⁵ Niall Lucy defines the current situation (formerly figured by Baudrillard) as follows: “Reality now is always already constituted in advance by its reproducibility as text, [...]. What is the difference between a war or a famine somewhere in the world and newsreel footage of those events on television?” (1997: 52). As Lehman polemically puts it, “contemporary literary theory is slow to grant an essential difference between life and imagined life in the late twentieth century,” maintaining that “the depiction of actual bodies explains part of the representational power of nonfiction in the late-twentieth-century culture” (1997: 11-13). I will return to this discussion in my chapter on *The Executioner’s Song*, a metajournalistic narrative which raises the question whether there is a difference between a real execution and a televised one.

The Construction of Fictional and Historical Worlds

The distinction between fiction and nonfiction is obliterated by textual theories that regard all texts as equally ‘fictional,’ thus producing a widespread phenomenon of *panfictionality* (e.g., Ryan 1997: 165-167). As some theorists representing narrative poetics have maintained, however, panfictionality “militates against the very enterprise of (narrative) poetics” (Herman 1998: 598-600). In recent years, one of the most important contributions to the distinction between fiction and nonfiction has been provided by the theory and semantics of *possible worlds*, whose basis is the idea that reality is a universe composed of a plurality of distinct worlds. The “central element” in this system of worlds is what we commonly interpret as “the actual world,” surrounded by an infinite number of “possible worlds” which are linked to the center by an “accessibility relation” (see Ryan 2001: 100; cf. Pavel 1986: 44-45; Herman 2002: 15-16). However, certain “nonreferential” theories of literature (especially semiotics and deconstruction) have maintained that, as a “self-referential” structure, literature does not need the concept of the world, either actual or imaginary (see Doležel 1990: 6-7). As Marie-Laure Ryan argues in her book *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, a crucial semantic claim about the actual world as “the realm of historical facts” has been strongly opposed by poststructuralist and postmodern theories, in whose discourse the idea of a world enjoying special status is easily interpreted as logocentrism and hierarchical thinking (see 2001: 100; cf. Ryan 1998: 813). Because all worlds are language-made constructions, postmodernists read all texts as world-constructing fiction.

What “postmodernism” (as Ryan broadly uses the concept) especially problematizes and eliminates from its own discourse is the *correspondence theory of truth*, according to which truths exist independently of the discourse that describes them. We may note Nelson Goodman’s well-known formulation in his *Ways of Worldmaking*: “Fiction operates in the actual worlds in much the same way as nonfiction” (Goodman 1978: 104; see Doležel 1998a: 236n; 1998b: 806n).³⁶ In pragmatist and relativist systems, truths are always “man-made.” Goodman’s statement that “world-versions” are symbolically and discursively produced must, however, be

³⁶ According to Mary Louise Pratt’s claim made on the basis of a speech act theory of literary discourse, “[n]onfictional narrative accounts are world-creating in the same sense as are works of [fictional] literature” (1977: 95; my emphasis). This argument rests on the idea that the actual world is a member of the set of all possible worlds, but what Pratt’s model seems to be lacking is the idea of the *centrality* of the actual world in that set of worlds.

problematized. As Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen emphasize in their critique of Goodman's pragmatism, "there is a vast and obvious difference between a version, or representation, of a world, albeit a 'right' version, and a world which it is a version *of*" (1994: 210). According to Goodman's constructivist and pragmatist position, "[w]e can have words without a world but no world without words or other symbols" (1978: 6), but Lubomír Doležel feels it crucial to note that "Goodman gives no directions as to where 'words without a world' might be found" (1998b: 806n). In Goodman's version, then, the world is discursively made and does not exist independently of discourse, whereas possible-world semantics accords a central place to a hypothetical real or actual world existing independently of the mind. From the viewpoint of language use, this means that human language "cannot create the actual world that exists and goes on independently of language and any other representation," so that "the only kind of worlds that human language is capable of creating or producing is *possible worlds*" (Doležel 1999: 253). In Goodman's model there is no distinction between actual and fictional worlds and, accordingly, no distinction between fiction and nonfiction, whereas in the possible-worlds model proposed by Doležel this distinction is crucial.

What postmodernist theorists are reluctant to take into account is that when considered as *worlds*, different texts function (and are responded to) in different ways. As Ryan argues:

In *fiction*, the reference world is inseparable from the image, since it is created by the text, and the contemplation of the image automatically transports the reader into the world it represents. But in *nonfiction* we can distinguish two moments: (1) one in which the reader constructs the text (i.e., becomes engaged imaginatively in the representation); and (2) one in which the reader evaluates the text (i.e., distances himself from the image, takes it apart, and assesses the accuracy of its individual statements with respect to the reference world). In the first phase, the reader contemplates the textual world from the inside in, and in the second, from the outside in (2001: 104-105; my emphases).

In his *Matters of Fact*, Daniel Lehman likewise reads nonfiction "over the edge," so that a given real event, which the text refers to, is experienced by the reader both through the text and outside of it. As Ruth Ronen suggests, a pragmatically determined dividing line between fiction and nonfiction means that neither 'segregationist' approaches – those that maintain the fiction/nonfiction distinction as a given and absolute – nor 'integrationist' ones – blurring the difference – are convincing, for fictionality is no longer viewed as an immanent property of texts (see 1994: 10-11). Once again, one of the pragmatic questions that must be taken into account is the difference

of the worlds, including the notion that the real world exists prior to its representation in the works of nonfiction.

As noted before in my study, truth-conditions appear to be a significant factor in an attempt to distinguish between fiction and nonfiction; however, the distinction is not so clear on the level of literariness:

What appears at first sight from the vantage point of possible-worlds semantics is that literary (poetic) properties are irrelevant for the truth-functional status of texts. It is one thing to write in a certain style, but it is a completely different thing to make truth claims. Literariness and truth-functionality are two distinct qualities of writing: the former is a property of texture, the latter is a matter of the communicative aims and speech-act characteristics of textual activity. History, journalism, legal and political discourse, and so forth, all falling to the domain of cognitive communication, can be conducted in styles of various degrees of poeticity. But no flights of poetry or rhetoric can liberate them from truth-valuation. (Doležel 1998b: 791)

Doležel argues that fictional texts are liberated from truth-valuation and that they construct sovereign fictional worlds, whereas historical (non-fictional) texts are constrained by the requirement of truth-valuation and construct historical worlds which are models of the actual world's past. Even though nonfiction can be and even should be evaluated according to its fact-based truthfulness (in connection with the actual world), the texts themselves cannot construct their own validity. Rather “[t]he reader evaluates the truth value of the text by comparing its assertions to another source of knowledge relating to the same reference world” (Ryan 1997: 166). Because a specific real-world event is usually not available to us in “itself,” but through texts and representations, this means that the nonfictional text stands in a polemical relation with other representations. As David Herman also puts it, interpreting nonfictional narratives entails relocating not to an alternative possible world but to a possible world that is a version of the world deemed actual; thus “more than one story can be told” about various historical events (see 2002: 15). This means that nonfiction “lives” in the field of textual “competition” and in a kind of discursive “struggle,” and this competition becomes possible because the texts share the same reference world.³⁷

³⁷ In the case of fiction, on the other hand, “[f]rom the uniqueness of the reference world, it follows that the fictional text stands above competition,” and therefore, “fictional truths are unassailable, whereas the facts of the actually actual world can always be questioned” (Ryan 1997: 167; 2001: 104). Apparently, Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a “rewriting” of *Jane Eyre*, but it does not in any way *falsify* Charlotte Brontë’s novel (although some political readings of Bertha Mason’s character would contend even this). As Herman notes, referring to this well-known example, “fictions encode ‘stand-alone’

As Ryan stresses, the difference between fiction and nonfiction is a matter of the function ascribed to the image of a world: “[i]n one case [fiction], contemplating the textual world is an end in itself, while in the other [nonfiction], the textual world must be evaluated in terms of its accuracy with respect to an external reference world known to the reader through other channels of information” (2001: 92). As already noted in my Introduction, fictional worlds are metaphorically closed systems, whereas nonfictions must remain more “open” systems. For example, there is possible extratextual knowledge about Lee Harvey Oswald and the Kennedy assassination which may cancel and challenge Mailer’s account in *Oswald’s Tale*. Paradoxically, as it seems, fictional truths have a solidity that cannot be reached in nonfiction: we may never know for sure who was behind the assassination of John F. Kennedy, but the case of the murder of Roger Ackroyd can be closed once and for all (see Ryan 1997: 167). Possible worlds can be understood as abstract collections of states of affairs, so that “*Julius Caesar’s dying as a consequence of the wounds inflicted by the conspirators* is an actual state of affairs, as opposed to *Julius Caesar’s surviving the plot against his life*” (Pavel 1986: 50). The latter version, or state of affairs, can only belong to a possible world of fiction, whereas the former belongs to the actual world and can be variously represented both in nonfiction and fiction.

According to Genette, “the text of fiction does not *lead* to any extratextual reality; everything it borrows [...] from reality [...] is transformed into an element of fiction” and “by pretending to make assertions (about fictional beings), the novelist is doing something else, namely, creating a *work* of fiction” (1993 [1991]: 26, 37).³⁸ As Paul Ricoeur also suggests, fictional narrative achieves something alien to historical narrative when creating “imaginary worlds” that open “an unlimited career for the manifestation of time” (1984 [1983]: 64). In historical fiction the reality of the characters and events forms a question of its own. The historical novel, especially in its postmodernist form, is a hybrid which seems to bring together the imaginative world of fiction and the actual world of history (e.g., Doctorow’s *Ragtime*; Coover’s *The Public Burning*). The so-called historical fiction constructs a seemingly hybridized space between the actual and the fictional worlds, but still Ryan argues that “this does not turn the text into a blend of

storyworlds, which cannot be falsified by virtue of their relation to other storyworlds” (2002: 16).

³⁸ Mailer notes in his afterwords to *Harlot’s Ghost* that when compared to nonfiction writers “novelists have a unique opportunity – they can create superior histories out of an enhancement of the real, the unverified, and the wholly fictional” (HG 1103).

fiction and nonfiction,” for “[t]he primary reference world is the fictional world” (1997: 168). The historical novel is actually an exemplary case of fiction in which characters and events may stem from different ontological realms; Cohn notes that “encounters between characters that belong to different ontological realms are not at all unusual in historical fiction” (1999: 154). Mailer’s *An American Dream*, while not a typical historical novel, begins with the narrator Stephen Rojack’s more or less reliable remark: “I met Jack Kennedy in November, 1946” (AD 1). This beginning sheds a certain romantic and mythical light on the narrative as a whole.³⁹ On the other hand, in his piece of reportage, “Superman Comes to the Supermarket,” Mailer actually gives an account of his actually meeting John F. Kennedy in 1960. While here Mailer also “figures” Kennedy for certain narrative purposes, he takes care not to transform the future President into some imaginative realm of fiction.

Accordingly, in the paratext (“Author’s Note”) of his novel *Harlot’s Ghost* Mailer explains his methods as follows:

If this had been a book of nonfiction, I would have had footnotes and attributions on many a point, plus an index and bibliography, and indeed I will pay my respect to the volumes that surrounded me these last seven years before this disclaimer was done.

Nonetheless, *Harlot’s Ghost* is a work of fiction, and most of its main characters and the majority of its accompanying cast are imaginary. Since they move among real personages, of whom a few are prominent in our history, it may be important to explain how I used the books I studied.

Some nonfiction awakens the imagination. Its personages take on the luster of good fictional characters, that is, they seem as real and complex as men and women we know intimately. The larger share of nonfiction, however, deadens perceptions.

In the course of putting together this attempt, there was many a choice to make on one’s approach to formal reality. The earliest and most serious decision was not to provide imaginary names for all the prominent people who entered the work.

It was obvious, therefore, that one would have to give Jack Kennedy his honest name. It would not damage the novel. He would be as intense and fictional a presence in the novel’s life as any imaginary human could ever be; one could only strip him of his fictional magic by putting a false name on him; then the reader’s perception becomes no more than, “Oh, yes, President Fennerly is Jack Kennedy – now I will get to learn what made Jack Kennedy tick” (HG 1100-1101).

According to Mailer’s vision, a free imaginative construction where real-life persons live and act at the same ontological level as purely fictional characters marks such novelistic narrative off from nonfiction. As Cohn has

³⁹ Cf. Peter Rabinowitz: “[t]he fact that Norman Mailer begins his *American Dream* with a reference to John Kennedy supports an interpretation that sees the whole novel as lit by the Kennedy mystique” (1987: 63-64).

it, “it is by its unique potential for presenting characters that fiction most consistently and most radically severs its connections with the real world outside the text” (1999: 16). In *Genius and Lust*, his interpretation and anthology of the writings of Henry Miller, Mailer argues that when representing and fictionalizing his real-life love June in the massive trilogy *The Rosy Crucifixion*, Miller “never succeeds, never quite, in making her real to us, as *novelistically real* as Anna Karenina or Emma Bovary. She hovers in that space between *the actual and the fictional* where everything is just out of focus” (GL 181; my emphases). In effect, Mailer appears to be theoretically aware of the distinct ways of fictional and factual worldmaking, even suggesting that the image that spans the actual and the fictional is a blurred, unfocused image.

In *The Deer Park*, Mailer’s fictional novelist Sergius O’Shaughnessy writes:

I had the idea that there were *two worlds*. There was a *real world* as I called it, a world of wars and boxing clubs and children’s homes on back streets, and this real world was a world where orphans burned orphans. It was better not even to think of this. I liked the other world in which almost everybody lived. The *imaginary world*. (DP 45; my emphases)⁴⁰

While the actual-world models provide sources for fiction’s poetic imagination, the distinction and boundary between fictionality and actuality remains. A writer of fiction usually “draws” his or her materials from reality, from the models and entities provided by the actual world, so that realistic fiction, in particular, depends on “mimetic communication to create possible worlds that interplay with actual worlds” (Lehman 1997: 3). As possible-worlds theorists argue, the class of mimetic texts includes both fiction and nonfiction, and both fictional and nonfictional texts invite the reader to imagine a world. The concept of *storyworld* applies both to fictional and nonfictional narrative, so that “all narratives have world-creating power, even though, depending on the kind of narrative involved, interpreters bring to bear on these storyworlds different evaluative criteria” (Herman 2002: 16). Yet though semantic and pragmatic criteria, including the possible-worlds theory, are useful in generalizing on the differences between fiction and nonfiction, specific literary works have their own ways of functioning. We always need to turn towards individual narratives and can fully expect them to refine or modify theoretical models.

⁴⁰ Robert Alter comments on this passage: “Mailer’s reiterated distinction between real and imaginary worlds is absolutely crucial to this novel and [...] to all of Mailer’s subsequent work” (1984 [1970]: 51).

The Factuality and Aesthetics of Nonfictional Narrative

As I have argued so far, nonfiction should be distinguished from fiction on the basis of its reality reference and its pragmatic uses, and in some ways on the basis of formal devices. In this chapter I will delineate the literary aspects of nonfiction, especially its ways of transforming factual materials into aesthetic forms. In the second part of this chapter, I use Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* to illuminate the powers and problems of literary nonfiction.

The Figuration of Facts

While Hayden White's relativist notion of historiography has been much criticized, we may note that his later, more moderate position distinguishes between two *levels*, as it were, of historical writing:

Obviously, considered as accounts already established as facts, competing narratives can be assessed, criticized, and ranked on the basis of their fidelity to the factual record, their comprehensiveness, and the coherence of whatever arguments they may contain. But narrative accounts do not consist only of factual statements (singular existential propositions) and arguments; they consist as well of poetic and rhetorical elements by which what would otherwise be a list of facts is transformed into a story (White 1999: 28; see also White 1987: 45; cf. Lützel 1992: 33).

There is no theoretical problem here, *if* we maintain that poetical and rhetorical transformation is not necessarily a "fiction-making operation," as suggested by White in another context. It is important to maintain the distinction between the first level in White's scheme (an account of events already established as facts, so that competing narratives can be evaluated on the basis of their relationship to these facts), and the *literary* level, the poetic and rhetorical elements by which facts are transformed into an aesthetic narrative, or the literary work of art.⁴¹

⁴¹ According to another interpretation, "the literary text, by existing in a *metaphorical* relationship with the world in which the text is the vehicle and the world the tenor, is in principle ornamental," whereas "the nonliterary text, by existing in a *metonymical* relationship, is integral, that is, perceived to be part of our world" (Sauerberg 2001: 93). Traditionally (actually deriving from Aristotle) history is associated with "the singular, the unexpected, the uncontrollable, the unsystematic" and fiction, on the other hand, with "the ordered, the coherent, the general or universal" (Gossman 1990: 233). It might even

As Barbara Lounsberry suggests, verifiable subject matter and exhaustive research guarantee the *nonfiction* side of literary nonfiction, whereas the language, structure, and narrative form emphasize that the goal has been a *literary* one (see 1990: xv). Eric Heyne emphasizes that “literary nonfiction creates absorbing, convincing patterns from the material of verifiable facts” (1987: 487), whereas in John Hartsock’s words, texts of literary journalism/nonfiction are literary in the sense that as social allegories they eschew a rhetorical literalness for a figurativeness or literary resonance reflected in a host of interpretive possibilities (see 2000: 11). In Arthur C. Danto’s well-known thesis, developed in his book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, the making of art means a transformation of natural and common objects into conscious art works. This idea gives me one starting point in my consideration of Mailer’s self-conscious way of “transfiguring” his factual, documentary and journalistic subjects and sources *into* literary works.⁴² As Leona Toker suggests when speaking of documentary narratives as works of art, “our doubt whether modernist paintings, sculptures, music, or texts are, in fact, works of art is an *integral part* of their aesthetic effect” (1997: 214). Although Danto is mainly interested in the visual arts, he wants to “reflect upon the animating motive of Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, a text proclaimed when it appeared some years back as the first nonfiction novel” (1981: 144). While Danto sees some illuminating innovations in Capote’s experiment with form and content, he still wants to “imagine” (in a creative way that marks his now canonical book) another nonfiction story “where the term ‘story’ is meant to carry the connotation of a work of literary art” and whose “writer is considerably in advance of Capote as an artistic experimenter” (ibid.: 145). This “imagined” writer, in Danto’s scheme, is called *M*. *M* is trying “to make art” out of the format of a newspaper story and from the basis of investigations concerning a murder case:

M has repudiated the usual form of fictional presentation because this is, he says, nonfiction. It is nonfiction, but by no means nonliterature (like the newspaper story itself). [...] The medium is not the message, but the form in which the message is given, and this is taken as a stylistic device by the artists who have become conscious of the structure of the media. The form of the newspaper story, which we pay little attention to because it is so commonplace in our culture, is chosen because of its commonplaceness by *M* – it is not commonplace in literature (yet) (Ibid.: 146).

be suggested that while literary fiction is something “purely” literary, literary nonfiction combines (more or less successfully) literary and nonliterary components. As Annie Dillard suggests, “works of nonfiction can be coherent and crafted works of literature [...] insofar as the parts of their structures cohere internally” (1987: 73).

⁴² Michael Glenday accordingly states that Mailer’s major work *The Armies of the Night* represents “a form offering an imaginative transfiguration of fact” (1995: 36).

Here emerges the idea of the nonfiction artist's self-reflexive understanding of both the content and the form of his medium: literary nonfictions are transfigurations of, for example, factual newspaper stories into self-conscious works of literary art.

Here we have come close to the core of M's, or Mailer's, poetics of nonfiction.⁴³ We may therefore speak of his self-reflexive way of bringing together the factual content of journalism and the artistic form of figurative and literary writing, and his foregrounding of those "poetic and rhetorical elements by which what would otherwise be a list of facts is transformed into a story," as White phrases it. This kind of transformation of factual materials into the form of literary narrative has been conventionally regarded (by White among others) as a kind of fiction-making practice, and we may find similar traits in some postmodernist readings of Mailer's nonfiction:

Calling the reader's attention to the inevitably transforming role of his fiction-making consciousness, Mailer reminds the reader that his work, despite its factual content, is in the ultimate epistemological and ontological sense an artifice, an aesthetic shape that necessarily achieves mimesis of the external world through the constructing act of a shaping consciousness. (Hellmann 1981: 57)

While John Hellmann, in his *Fables of Fact*, is here obviously putting too many ideas into one paragraph, we may still argue that this statement mentions some of the crucial questions concerning Mailer's nonfictional poetics. Thus, here we have (1) Mailer's fiction-making consciousness, deriving from his novelistic work; (2) his powerful rhetoric that addresses the reader; (3) his method of transforming actual events into a narrative text; (4) the narrative's factual content and its reference to its documentary materials; (5) an artificial and aesthetic construction of nonfiction; (6) mimesis or the act of representation of "reality"; and (7) Mailer's shaping consciousness, including his idiosyncratic philosophy and mythology.⁴⁴

According to my view of literary nonfiction, literary texts generally are always more or less 'made up' and 'fabricated,' whatever their relation to an extratextual reality. As Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen remark, while both fictional and historiographical activities "make demands on the

⁴³ Danto's examples (like his implied allusions to *Marilyn* and *The Executioner's Song*) are telling enough for us to conclude that the imaginary "M" writer actually refers to Mailer and that Danto is speaking of Mailer's self-conscious practice in producing literary nonfiction.

⁴⁴ Compare also Ronald Weber's notion of the making of literary nonfiction: "[i]n the obvious [...] novelistic artistry of scene and characterization the writer makes his presence and his shaping consciousness known" (1974: 20). In John Hartsock's reading of literary nonfiction, "a shaping consciousness [...] reflects subjectivity as one contributing means of production" (2000: 83). Both critics refer to *The Armies of the Night*.

human imagination and intelligence,” fiction is *construction* whereas history is *reconstruction* (see 1994: 310). Still, Lamarque and Olsen’s valuable semantic and pragmatic criteria sometimes distinguish between *artistic* and *factual* constructions too rigidly, without a closer look at specific works of art. In my view, literary works (fictional *or* nonfictional) are formal compositions and linguistic constructions, always revealing some authorial consciousness of what the “poetic” is (cf. Cardinal 1981: 12). Aristotle famously sees art, or ‘poetry,’ as a possibility or a tool with the help of which we can search for deeper truths: *poetry* is more philosophical and more significant than *history*, for poetry is concerned with the *universal* (truths) whereas history is more concerned with the *particular* (facts). According to Murray Krieger, who sees continuing value in Aristotle’s distinctions, ‘poetry’ transforms the randomness of historical facts into ordered, teleological coherences. Practically this amounts to the author’s artistic work of transforming the “brute facts” and “raw materials” of complex, incoherent empirical reality into more or less closed poetic forms (see Krieger 1974: 341). Thus *poiesis*, the act of making in language, remains the one meaning-producing activity that we as humans possess (see Price 1999: 306). What especially counts in nonfictional practices is, however, that the making of poetic forms and the figurative reshaping of history does not *free* the ‘poet’ from historical materials and constraints.

History, at least in the modern sense of the concept, has been associated with the ‘real’ past and with ‘facts’ concerning it. Accordingly, one of the modern requirements of historical writing has been an adherence to giving a serious and truthful account of the actual events of the past (e.g., Rigney 1990: x-xi; Carpenter 1995: 1).⁴⁵ In recent studies of historiography it has been quite common to argue that *style* and *rhetoric* are crucial features which turn histories into “narratives.”⁴⁶ While literary nonfiction is also

⁴⁵ Critical histories, often in the form of metahistory, are highly conscious of the fact that the term ‘history’ is filled with “bivalent ambiguity”: “*History*, as we all know, designates both the *object* itself (the actual events of the past) and a discursive *account* of the object (a historical text, for example)” (Kreiwirth 2000: 303). From the viewpoint of literary theory, what is interesting in historical writing is “the literary dimension of historiographical texts,” and for a long time now “history has been a narrative in words, and for that reason it has been subject to literary and rhetorical analysis” (Gossman 1990: 3). Roland Carpenter also notes: “Because of their reliance upon words, writers of history [...] cannot escape potential rhetorical elements and effects: style and narration” (1995: 3).

⁴⁶ We may note that the words ‘history’ and ‘story’ derive from the Greek word *historia*, implying a form of knowledge and a way of knowing; similarly, the word ‘narrative’ derives originally from *gnarus*, also meaning ‘knowing’ (see Kreiwirth 2000: 304; cf. Lützel 1992: 30; Widdowson 1999: 18).

always something *made*, its relation to literary *imagination* and literary *creation* is even more complex. In order to understand the *factual* basis and aim of nonfiction, we need to distinguish “facts” from “truths”: no factual account can hope to be altogether truthful, and it is always possible for fiction to reach the deeper truth of reality through its imagination, as Mailer himself appears to believe. We may contend that *facts* are always to some degree ‘made’ and ‘formed’ (according to the etymology of *facere*), even though not ‘invented’ and ‘created’ in exactly the same sense as “fictions” (as in *ingere*, originally, however, meaning “to make or form”).⁴⁷ Yet it may be a fact that both factual and fictional narratives use specific tropological constructions and narrative strategies “to endow events with meanings” (White 1999: 11). What we are used to calling “facts,” are very much our cultural-specific tools for depicting the nature of external reality, and facts may potentially always change through checking and redefinition. Since *the truth* is always all too complex, the search for it may be “well served by inventions, exaggerations, and other transformations of fact” (Heyne 1987: 486). As the practice of literary nonfiction suggests, the belief in “cold” and “objective” facts is a positivist illusion; rather “facts can only be understood once there is a reflexive understanding of feeling or subjectivity that determines which facts are to be valued” (Hartsock 2000: 180). According to James Phelan’s definition, “that our facts change as our discursive frameworks change does not prove that there are no facts; it proves rather that there are multiple facts and multiple ways of construing facts” (1996: 17). As Phelan argues, facts are always mediated and seen from within the confines of a given perspective, but that does not mean that the facts are *created* by that perspective, as proposed by pragmatist and relativist notions. Facts, such as those pertaining to past historical events, are always open to negotiation, revision, correction, and interpretation.⁴⁸

While historical facts are available as non-textual forms (such as monuments) and as textual forms (such as chronicles), in any *factual* narrative

⁴⁷ The discourses of the humanities are now largely dominated by the belief “the facts’ [...] are produced by their own descriptions and interpretations,” thus emphasizing facts as something ‘fabricated,’ perhaps even ‘invented’ (see Tamen 2000: 6, 99). While the meaning and significance are viewed as residing not in material objects or historical events themselves but in interpretive frameworks, facts likewise emerge as something *made* by the discourse (see Maranda 1998: 432).

⁴⁸ There is consequently a certain fault line in Mas’ud Zavarzadeh’s model according to which “the nonfiction novelist uses facts phenomenally to capture the dimensions of facts as facts,” so that “by using facts phenomenally, *the nonfiction novelist merely registers facts without the accompaniment of an interpretative pattern*” (1976: 65-66; my emphasis). To my mind, this cannot be a correct analysis of the very nonfiction artists whom Zavarzadeh discusses (Capote, Mailer, Wolfe).

the neutrality and inherent truthfulness of the facts is challenged through the interpretive work of the historian. Thus if the historian “is dealing with textual material, a writing process will already have been at work interpreting the facts” (Sauerberg 2001: 87). White’s thesis about making history meaningful through literary shaping and emplotting resembles such post-modernist poetics which argues that “the meaning and shape are not *in the events*, but *in the systems* which make those past ‘events’ into present historical ‘facts’” (Hutcheon 1988: 89). As Linda Hutcheon herself believes, to take this position does not mean a dishonest refuge from the truth but an acknowledgment of the meaning-making function of human constructs. The assassination of President Kennedy (1963), the March on the Pentagon (1967), or the Apollo 11 moon flight (1969) – subjects of Mailer’s nonfiction – all happened in some form. The facts concerning those events are, however, constructed afterwards, involving both scrupulous evidence and constructed interpretations usually in the form of texts and images.

The “Nonfiction Novel” as a Literary Work: Capote’s *In Cold Blood*

Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1965), subtitled “A True Account of Multiple Murder and Its Consequences,” marks a watershed in contemporary American literature in its attempt “to mingle factual reportage with novelistic style” (Lesser 1997: 406).⁴⁹ The narrative deals with the murder of the entire four-member Clutter family in a small Kansas town in November 1959 and the subsequent arrest, trial, and execution of the murderers Dick Hickock and Perry Smith in April 1965.

In the Acknowledgements section of his book Capote makes the following clarification: “All the material in this book not derived from my own observation is either taken from official records or is the result of interviews with the persons directly concerned” (1966 [1965]: n.p.).⁵⁰ The theoretical

⁴⁹ *In Cold Blood* has been a general test case for probing the question in what sense “documentary narrative” is a form of “art” (see Pizer 1974: 207) or “what makes the nonfiction novel novelistic, what makes nonfiction fictive” (Anderson 1987: 48). As Ronald Weber argues, when speaking of *In Cold Blood*, “no other work of literary nonfiction is so resolutely literary in its intentions” (1980: 74). In John Hellmann’s words, after Capote’s book “the concept of a nonfiction novel combining the highest fidelity to journalistic fact with the highest effects of literary art became a matter of fierce debate” (1986: 51). And as John Hartsock argues, the book has achieved “all but canonical status as narrative literary journalism despite fictional invention of which Capote has been accused” (2000: 13). See also T. Petterson (forthcoming).

⁵⁰ In a famous interview conducted by George Plimpton, Capote claimed to have created “a serious new art form: the ‘nonfiction novel’” which differs from the “impure genre”

and pragmatic problems presented by Capote's work concern such questions as how a narrative which purports to be factual can succeed both in being a closely researched account of documentable material and, at the same time, an aesthetic artifact akin to the novel. Barbara Lounsberry, for instance, argues that "large and small errors and inventions in Capote's *In Cold Blood* constitute a violation of contract for many readers; any claims to greatness that book now tenders must be predicated on the 'truths' of fiction rather than fact" (1990: xiv). According to Eric Heyne, who actually makes *In Cold Blood* his test case for his theory of literary nonfiction, Capote damaged his intended "nonfiction novel" by violating certain conventions of accurate presentation, for example employing an omniscient point of view and creating many imaginary scenes especially concerning his "hero," the murderer Perry Smith. Yet in Heyne's theoretical scheme, *In Cold Blood* still remains, despite its shortcomings, a work of *nonfiction*. This is because the factual status is crucial to the experience of reading the book, which also means that readers are invited to make a decision about its factual adequacy.

As Heyne puts it, "in [that] *doubt* lies a clue to the difference between fiction and nonfiction," for "it would not make sense to 'doubt' a work of fiction" (1987: 480; my emphasis). According to Heyne, there is a strong tendency among critics to discuss Capote's book as a novel, but this tendency is oddly based on two very different evaluations of the book. Thus "some critics argue that *In Cold Blood* is radically inaccurate, and so should be labeled 'fiction,' whereas others so admire its dramatic power that they want to grant it honorary status as a novel" (ibid.: 481). The critical response to *In Cold Blood* has created a symptomatic theoretical confusion between fictional status and literary merit, and Heyne wants to stress the pragmatic and semantic definition according to which the concept of literature is a different from that of fiction. This is the emphasis which we also find in speech-act theory and the philosophy of literature, as discussed above. To be sure, Capote's book is hardly the best example if we want to defend the idea that fictional and nonfictional narratives share technical similarities in their construction of meaning and still remain distinct textual practices, and therefore Heyne's own arguments rest on the somewhat shaky ground of

of the "documentary novel" by keeping to the facts and avoiding the freedoms of fiction (see Plimpton 1968 [1966]: 39, 25; my emphasis). Capote's artistic motives have also been discussed: "The tragedy in Kansas seemed to be ideal material for creating a new, hybrid literary form" (Anderson 1987: 74). However, Capote's mode of the nonfiction novel in *In Cold Blood* "was hardly new" (Hartsock 2000: 109). In fact, the practice itself is an old one, and the term (the nonfiction novel) was already used by Jacques Barzun in 1956 (see Zavarzadeh 1976: 72-73).

textual evidence. In my opinion, *In Cold Blood* comes close to a *classical realist novel* in its temporal ordering, symbolic coherence, and omniscient-like narration, in its detailed characterization of people and places, and perhaps most strongly in its occasional penetration into the characters' minds. Thus, it "fails" to be a self-reflexive work of literary nonfiction in the sense in which I would define the mode, that is, as a "multireferential" and "multilayered" rhetorical and experimental text.⁵¹

As a number of critics have noted, somewhat contrary to his truth-claiming stance, Capote appears to adopt an omniscient narrative voice in his book, occasionally entering the minds of his characters and describing their feelings and attitudes (e.g., Anderson 1987: 53). There are various other 'fictionalizing' techniques as well. For example, in the first section of his narrative, Capote creates suspense through anticipating the coming murder tragedy that faces the peaceful Clutter family: "Then, touching the grip of his cap, he [Mr. Clutter] headed for home and the day's work, *unaware that it would be his last*" (1966 [1965]: 25; my emphasis); "[Nancy] set out the clothes she intended to wear to church the next morning: [...] *It was a dress in which she was to be buried*" (ibid.: 67; my emphasis). The suspense here is also created by Capote's characteristically novelistic device, his "synchronic" narration or the crosscutting between the daily life of the Clutters and the threatening, gradual approach of the murderers Perry and Hickock in their car. As it has been argued, the symbolic coherence, metaphorical structuration, and mythical allusions are signs of the conscious novelistic practice of *In Cold Blood*: in a way, the book "betrays" its self-proclaimed objectivity by using literary devices and symbolic patterns characteristic of its author.⁵²

In his poetic opening sequence, Capote constructs Holcomb, a little Kansas town, as a kind of pastoral idyll, the last resort of American innocence, connecting it to a larger town nearby, with the appropriate name of Garden City. According to Zavarzadeh, "the town itself gradually loses its geographical solidity and becomes an emblem of quintessential America, where what happens is less a random murder than a collision between the forces and ideas which have shaped the American Dream" (1976: 116;

⁵¹ This is not to say that self-reflexivity as such is a sign of literary art; my point here is only to distinguish Capote's "mimetic" practice from Mailer's more self-reflexive method.

⁵² While the detective Alvin Dewey reflects that the murderers' confessions "failed to satisfy his sense of *meaningful design*" (Capote 1966 [1965]: 277; my emphasis), Capote's narrative itself aims to produce that "meaningful design" (see Frus 1994: 184). As Anderson argues, Capote's book's "textures and subtle symbolisms give it the feel of a novel" (1987: 48).

cf. Pizer 1974: 218).⁵³ In the first pages of the narrative, the peace of this sleepy, almost ghostly place is suddenly broken by “foreign sounds” which “impinged on the normal nightly Holcomb noises – on the *keening hysteria* of coyotes, the dry *scrape* of scuttling tumbleweed, the racing, receding *wail* of locomotive *whistles*” (Capote 1966 [1965]: 17; my emphases). These foreign sounds are, in fact, “four shotgun blasts *that, all told, ended six human lives*” (ibid.; my emphasis). Through this fatalistic figuration Capote not only reveals the plot of his story, but also offers keys to the interpretation of the text as a whole. This, then, is a narrative not only about the four persons of the Clutter family killed “in cold blood” but equally about the two killers themselves executed by society “in cold blood.” Obviously, this notion is reflected in the subtitle of the book: it is about a multiple murder *and* its consequences.⁵⁴

The most troubled response to *In Cold Blood* has often resulted from Capote’s identification with Perry Smith, a child-like mastermind behind the gory crime, a character he “created” on the basis of their mutual meetings and interviews. Rather strikingly, in Capote’s account, although not in other narratives about the actual case, Smith is the only murderer (see Frus 1994: 184-185). This kind of novelistic character *representation* obviously calls for an ethical response and perhaps resistance on the reader’s part, even more than does Mailer’s personal but still fact-based *speculation* in *Oswald’s Tale* that perhaps Lee Harvey Oswald was the sole assassin. In fact, Smith’s character not only resembles young Capote himself in some ways but his person also derives from the style and characterization of the novelist’s previous fiction (e.g., *Other Voices, Other Rooms*; *The Grass Harp*): “It was a changeling’s face, and mirror-guide experiments had taught him how to ring the changes, how to look now ominous, now impish, now soulful; a tilt of the head, a twist of the lips, and the corrupt gypsy became the gentle romantic” (Capote 1966 [1965]: 27; cf. Anderson

⁵³ Zavarzadeh, in accordance with his larger thesis regarding the nonfiction novel, argues that “in Capote’s book, actuality itself is registered, and the visible surface reveals the fictuality of a day’s life,” so that details of the Clutter family life, for example, reveal, “without *any* intervention from the writer’s inventive imagination, the symbolic resonance of each act” (1976: 118; my emphasis). In addition, *In Cold Blood* serves, for Zavarzadeh, as an exemplary case in which “the nonfiction novelist transcribes reality without imposing personal vision upon it” (ibid.: 124). Both these arguments are controversial.

⁵⁴ The influence of *In Cold Blood* on *The Executioner’s Song* may also be grasped in the title of Mailer’s book. Whereas “in cold blood” in Capote’s text refers both to the acts of the individual murderers and to those of a society that maintains the death sentence, “the executioner’s song” similarly implies that Gary Gilmore is an individual executioner who is executed by society.

1987: 79; Tonn 1994: 205; T. Pettersson [forthcoming]). Especially striking is the way Capote juxtaposes – also through his synchronic narrative structure – Perry Smith’s romantically “evil” (and somewhat *fictionalized*) figure with the gray, almost “boring” (and strictly *factual*) character of Herb Clutter, the man whose throat is cut and who is shot in the face by Perry.⁵⁵ The narrative culminates in Perry’s eventual “cold-blooded” death by hanging as focalized through another central character, Alvin Dewey, the detective who has worked to solve the case: “He remembered his first meeting with Perry in the interrogation room at Police Headquarters in Las Vegas – the dwarfish boy-man seated in the metal chair, his small booted feet not quite brushing the floor. And when *Dewey now opened his eyes, that is what he saw*: the same childish feet, tilted, dangling” (Capote 1966 [1965]: 341; my emphasis). In *The Executioner’s Song* Mailer similarly constructs Gary Gilmore as an outstanding person in comparison to the two ordinary, almost invisible Mormon men he shoots. However, in the course of the narrative it is through the use of various conventionally fictional techniques that Capote encourages the reader to sympathize with Perry; whereas Gilmore’s character in Mailer’s book is mainly constructed through the viewpoints of the witnesses, as the author’s own attitude to Gilmore remains quite ambiguous.

At this point, we may briefly notice the extensive use of *free indirect discourse* (FID) in *In Cold Blood*, an issue grappled with earlier in this chapter with examples from the experimental nonfictional narratives by Mailer and Wolfe. Free indirect discourse can be regarded as one of those literary strategies, or ‘qualities,’ which “encourage the reading that produces the literary ‘effect’” (Frus 1994: 51). According to many critics, various literary flourishes and embellishments are likely to call into question the very status of the factual adequacy or accuracy of the narrative, which itself (through the voice of its author) announces its factuality. As John Hollowell argues in his study *Fact & Fiction*, Capote’s book is “a work of literature because it is clearly the product of an artist’s imagination” (1977: 85). This *positive* approach to the book – which claims that *In Cold Blood* is a literary work *because* of its use of imagination, its shaping of the facts, and its manipulation of the reader’s responses to the characters and events – can be contrasted to such a *negative* approach which sees Capote’s fictionalizing devices as problematic, producing an impure hybrid between fact and fic-

⁵⁵ Capote’s strong identification technique shifts its narrative focus on the killers (especially on Perry) already before the killing, rendering the Clutter family somehow less luminous – with the possible exception of the “beautiful” character of young Nancy, whose lost innocent life haunts the narrative even in its sentimental closing in the cemetery: “[A] pretty girl in a hurry, her smooth hair swinging, shining – just such a young woman as Nancy might have been” (Capote 1966 [1965]: 343).

tion. As Dorrit Cohn critically notes at the beginning of her seminal study *Transparent Minds*, “by adopting this voice the reporter Truman Capote has taken on the pose of a novelist, has fictionalized his relationship to the real Dick Hickock and transformed this gruesomely real person into a realistic fictional character” (1978: 5). One of the more recent looks at this fictionalizing effect in Capote’s self-proclaimed nonfiction novel is provided by Paul Copley in his short account of how the narrative presents the thoughts and feelings of the protagonists. But, according to Copley, “[m]ore telling still are those sequences when the narration not only presents thoughts but shifts to a mode of free indirect discourse or *skaz*” (2001: 181). In order to illuminate Capote’s narrative strategy and his more or less peculiar employment of FID, let us consider the following paragraph:

Hadn’t he always been ‘a loner,’ and without any ‘real friends’ (except the grey-haired, grey-eyed and ‘brilliant’ Willie-Jay?). But he was afraid to leave Dick; merely to consider it made him feel ‘sort of sick’ as though he were trying to make up his mind to ‘jump off a train going ninety-nine miles an hour’ (Capote 1966 [1965]: 131; my emphases).

Here Capote uses the interviews given by Perry Smith as his narrative material, retaining the original idiom. What is foregrounded in the narrative as a whole, however, is the authorial voice of the narrator (recalling the omniscient narration of the classical realist novel) who only “cuts and pastes” the speech of his characters into his overall presentation. The character’s discourse remains clearly separated from the narrator’s voice through the use of *quotation marks*, which signal (however clumsily) the narrative’s journalistic-documentary basis. Still, as an artistic device (as developed in the style of novels since the nineteenth century) FID does not actually work in this “clarifying” way, and even the style of *In Cold Blood* is “contaminated” by instances of much more ambiguous discourse. For instance, in the paragraph above we get a complex structuration of sentences, beginning with “hadn’t he always been,” which is already an example of FID, even though it is followed by more explicit reflections and evaluations of Perry Smith (‘a loner,’ ‘brilliant’).

My analysis of Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song* (Chapter V) seeks to reveal how Capote’s *In Cold Blood* functions as an important subtext of that book. Mailer notes this himself, even though he adds that “Capote’s book and [his] are formally *similar*, but *vastly different*” (SA 98; my emphases). This opinion is echoed by Phyllis Frus in her comparison of these two “true-crime novels”:

The works are strikingly *similar*: in their subjects (violent, senseless crime; prison life; trials; punishment by execution); characters (both Perry Smith and Gary Gilmore are talented artists); and in their use of documents, interviews, and transcripts to present the past history not only of the criminals but of the settings (small towns in the West, in both cases – Holcomb, Kansas, and Provo, Utah). In addition, both use conventions of several nonfictional forms: biography, autobiography, history, and journalism. The novels are *vastly different* in execution and effect, however. (1994: 181; my emphases)

The main difference between these “novels,” according to Frus, is that *In Cold Blood* lacks “an awareness of its process of production,” since by contrast to Mailer’s extremely “reflexive” text, the reader is not able to learn “how the story of a nonfictional narrative became known” in Capote’s book (ibid.: 182). Frus means that *In Cold Blood* represents a “positivist seduction,” for the narrator speaks in an all-knowing, positive way about the supposedly real events. Thus, while Capote’s position as a working journalist and interviewer behind the scenes is *implied*, “most of the text’s reflexivity – its accounting for itself – has been repressed by the sections that use third-person ‘omniscient’ narration” (ibid.: 183).⁵⁶ The intertextual relationship, signaled by a minor detail in Mailer’s book (Gary Gilmore’s brother Mikal is reading *In Cold Blood*; see ES 456) extends to shared symbols and motifs in Capote’s and Mailer’s books: the loss of innocence, the romantic apple tree growing in Mrs. Johnson’s and Nicole Baker’s backyards, and the symbolic power of the wind, figuring the change and the memory of what is lost. Capote’s symbolic patterns and pastoral images are, however, more visible and voluble than Mailer’s, and the reader cannot ignore Capote the novelist in *In Cold Blood*, always foregrounding his stylistic choices.⁵⁷

The end of *In Cold Blood*, which shifts the narrative focus from the “rainy” darkness of the execution scene to the “sunny” peacefulness of the cemetery, is strong in its symbolic-allegorical patterns and images of life/death, light/darkness, sunshine/rain, cemetery/prison, future/past, hope/despair, etc. The equally strong alliteration of the coda emphasizes the poetic personality of the author: “Then, starting home, [Dewey] walked towards the trees, and under them, leaving behind him the big sky, the whisper of wind voices in the wind-bent wheat” (Capote 1966 [1965]: 343;

⁵⁶ Several other critics have also commented that *The Executioner’s Song* resembles *In Cold Blood* in its subject matter, theme, and technique but is strikingly different in narration and thematics (e.g., Radford 1983: 233; Anderson 1987: 121; Conn 1989: 528; Merrill 1992: 107).

⁵⁷ This is what Mailer himself argues when discussing Capote’s style in *In Cold Blood*: “Truman retained his style. Not the pure style – he simplified it – but it was still very much a book written by Truman Capote. You felt it every step of the way. [...] His killers were not the most interesting guys in the world, so it took Truman’s exquisite skills to make his work a classic” (SA 98).

my emphases). According to Chris Anderson's thesis in his book *Style as Argument*, "[o]ur experience of reading contemporary nonfiction is an experience of style," and the successfulness of the style of American nonfiction derives from the fact that it is conscious of its use of conventions, "complex, nuanced, layered, affecting, always aware of itself as style, as form, as artifice" (1987: 1, 5).⁵⁸ By turning inwards and by reflecting on its own methods, a specific kind of artistic nonfiction emphasizes that the very style and rhetoric it uses is always an argument, a comment, a metadiscourse, and thus not clearly distinguishable from the theme, the intent and the content of the work.

Toward Self-Reflexive American Nonfiction

On the American scene, Capote's *In Cold Blood* anticipates but does not wholly develop the poetics of self-reflexive literary nonfiction. In a sense, contemporary self-reflexive nonfiction has its predecessors in the early English novel written self-consciously in the mode of 'factual fiction.' What especially connects the nonfiction of writers like Mailer or Wolfe to American postmodernist fiction is its experimentality, metatextuality, and the reflection upon the constructedness of reality. In this section I also aim to show the seeming similarities and basic differences between "postmodernist" nonfiction and fiction.

From Factual Fiction to Postmodernist Nonfiction

The conventions of history and the novel are historically changing; therefore, the distinction between history and fiction depends on various writing practices rooted in more or less explicit epistemological and aesthetic choices (e.g., Pavel 1992: 18; Nünning 1998: 548). Hence we can also refer to the visible self-consciousness in Mailer's use of those terms *and* conventions in his "novel/history" *The Armies of the Night*. However, Mailer's swift move from 'history' to 'the novel' (and back again) often implies that there is no absolute distinction between the two.

Quite visibly, novelists themselves have been among the first to make significant statements about their work: "[The] concern of the novelist for the seriousness of his art, and the attitude that the literature is as true as

⁵⁸ As Ben Yagoda also suggests in his preface to the anthology *The Art of Fact*, in the "artfully written literary journalism" style is substance (see 1997: 15-16).

history, manifest themselves again and again in the history of the novel, in particular when the novelist reflects his own art” (Olsen 1987: 163). This goes a long way to shaping the novel as an intrinsically parodic genre that comments on and interprets previous modes of writing, questioning existing conventions, and telling “the ironical story of its own writing, a self-reflexive examination of its own genre” (Nelles 1997: 65). The “anti-novel” *Don Quixote* begins the tradition of self-conscious and parodic novels, and this tradition is followed by such works as Fielding’s *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews*:

Fielding calls himself “the founder of a new province of writing” with independent laws, the “comic epic poem in prose” – a deliberately paradoxical formulation, stressing both that the novel is born out of the convergence of diverse genres and that it is essentially parodic in nature: a way of setting previous conventions of writing against one another. More specifically, the novel is the parodic genre which results from setting the conventions of epic and romance against prosaic reality (Onega & García Landa 1996: 16).

Thus Capote’s way of giving his *In Cold Blood* the label ‘nonfiction novel’ signifies novelistic self-consciousness in much the same way as Fielding’s reflections upon his mixed novelistic discourse; arguably, Capote’s comment on his own book is a self-reflexive allusion to Fielding’s ‘comic epic poems in prose’ (see Wolfe 1973: 27; Davis 1996 [1983]: 199). For its part, Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night* aims at setting inherited conventions of writing (history and the novel) against one another without being “reduced” purely to either mode.

Indeed, in early eighteenth-century England, where a prominent tradition in the genre of the novel was born, novelistic narrative and journalistic reportage were intricately interconnected. In that context, terms like ‘news’ and ‘novel’ meant very much the same thing, producing a kind of “news/novels” discourse (see Davis 1996 [1983]: xii and *passim*). In his illuminating study on the origins of the English novel, *Factual Fictions*, Lennard Davis suggests that the term *novel* may be connected more to ‘history’ and ‘news’ than to ‘romance’ (as compared to the French word ‘roman’). In the historical context, the concept of ‘the novel’ does not carry connotations of fictionality so much as it carries ‘novelty,’ ‘newness,’ even some ‘unexpectedness,’ though it also has its links to the Italian *novella*, meaning a “little new story” or implying a new kind of anecdotal narrative that claims to be both recent and true (see Hartsock 2000: 50). The English term *the novel* therefore retains traces of different senses and meanings: new, innovative, strange, unexpected, and it can be interpreted as something which both “makes things new and strange” and offers “news and insights” about social

life (see Widdowson 1999: 95). Certain “strangeness” of the novel form and novelistic world-making is also something that Mailer alludes to in *The Armies of the Night*, where he crystallizes his movement and transformation from ‘history’ to ‘the novel’ in his contention that “[t]he collective novel which follows, while still written in the cloak of an historic style, and, therefore, continuously attempting to be scrupulous to the welter of a hundred confusing and opposed facts, will now unashamedly enter *that world of strange lights and intuitive speculation that is the novel*” (AN 255; my emphasis). This notion can be linked with Mailer’s other manifestoes, such as the principle of factual clarities becoming obscured in the novel.

The early English novel sought to emulate truthful documentation through self-conscious narrative practices (see Greetham 1999: 72). In Daniel Defoe’s novelistic history (or fictionalized documentary) of the great plague in London, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), the narrative comments on its own construction, production, and narrativity, showing that some parts may be fabrication and some parts can be proved to be factual. “Written” by one H.F., Defoe’s narrative employs the classic device of a “found manuscript,” which contains an eyewitness account of the horrible events in 1665 (when the actual author was only five years old). While *Journal* may be formally deemed a fictional work, since it is narrated not by its author but, being an imaginary diary, by a fictional figure, its presentation of the historical plague nevertheless contains documentary power and a disturbing reality effect. As Barbara Foley argues, this kind of classic pseudofactual novel constructs “an intrinsically ironic, even a parodic contract,” in which “the reader is asked to accept the text’s characters and situations as invented” but at the same time “the writer asks the reader to approach the text as if it were a nonfictional text – a memoir, a confession, a group of letters” (1986: 107). However, the *context* of early novels is obviously different from modernist self-conscious metafiction; Defoe’s *Journal* should therefore be understood as a self-conscious artifice belonging to the writing/reading conventions of its own time. As John Hartsock believes, Defoe occupies an ambiguous position in the evolution of modern narrative literary journalism, for “his ambiguity arises from his indifference to boundaries between fiction and nonfiction” (2000: 114). In fact, we should note, as Hartsock does, that the complex relations between fiction and nonfiction were only gradually firming up during the eighteenth century.

A Journal of the Plague Year is recognized as the pioneering classic of the hybridized genre where the so-called news/novels discourse is practiced in the long prose form. In addition, the book has been considered, more or less favorably, to be a model for the much later American convention, the New

Journalism or the nonfiction novel. Among other things, it has been argued that an analysis of the narrative patterns of Defoe's *Journal* can "clarify some of the issues and problems involved in the study of the nonfiction novel as a literary genre, and thus aid our understanding of contemporary examples" (Zavarzadeh 1976: 102). Dwight Macdonald, for example, suggests that Defoe's "hoax" represents the "ancestry" of the "parajournalistic" modes of the 1960s. As Macdonald puts it, the New Journalism, especially as represented by the work of Tom Wolfe, with its fusion (or contamination) of journalistic reportage and novelistic fiction, was a kind of "bastard form, having it both ways, exploiting the factual authority of journalism and the atmospheric license of fiction" (1974 [1965]: 223).⁵⁹ Incidentally and ironically, Macdonald himself is a character, called "the Critic," in Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* which, to my mind, is a worthy successor to Defoe's hoax. While Macdonald appears as a character inside a "hybrid" form of the nonfiction novel (*Armies*), he criticizes Mailer's performance in a theatre: "[Y]ou stand up there and carry on like some absolute *hybrid* between William Burroughs and Brendan Behan!" (AN 64; emphases in original).

A prominent feature in Wolfe's own definition of the New Journalism is that it is related to the *techniques* of the *realistic novel*. Thus, the new journalists of the sixties adopted those novelistic techniques (e.g., of Fielding, Balzac, Dickens) which were rejected by the contemporary fabulists and absurdists. Wolfe goes as far as to claim that (social) realism is the most essential element of all literature, but that contemporary American fiction (of the sixties and early seventies) has detached itself from that realism and gone towards "Neo-Fabulism." Wolfe goes on to ironizing about those postmodernist writers (like John Barth) who have abandoned realism and turned self-consciously towards "myth, fable, parable, legend" (1973: 41). In his rather complicated study of the postwar American nonfiction novel, *The Mythopoeic Reality*, Mas'ud Zavarzadeh envisions that the form and meaning of the "traditional" (realistic and liberal-humanist) novel was all but eliminated with the emergence of "new forms of narrative, especially

⁵⁹ According to Wolfe, the modes of the new journalism and the nonfiction novel offer the writer the freedom to use several and different techniques and to construct, for example, self-conscious literary references, like Mailer does in *Armies* by addressing the reader in the style of the classic novel (see Wolfe 1973: 33). As Wolfe argues, these techniques make it possible for journalism to work "*like a novel*" and still elicit "the absolute involvement of the reader." This involvement works differently from the text-reader cooperation in fiction, for in journalism (or nonfiction) it is the question of "the simple fact that the reader knows *all this actually happened*" (ibid.: 34). Wolfe, in his own words, discovered that it was possible to write accurate nonfiction with techniques usually associated with novels and short stories and that in journalism it was possible to use any literary device to excite the reader both intellectually and emotionally.

the nonfiction novel and various modes of transfiction” (1976: vii). As Zavarzadeh argues, using somewhat weighty terminology, the convention of the traditional novel was based on the author’s totalization of reality (meaning the novelist’s attempt to realistically represent the social reality in full), whereas the new modes of “supramodernism” belong to the “nontotalizing sensibility” which, through a “zero degree of interpretation,” is able to record accurately the absurd contemporary reality and to radically react to the current epistemological crisis.⁶⁰ In a prominent representative of the mode, Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, “everybody’s life becomes more *fabulous*, every minute, than the most *fabulous book*,” and the psychedelic bus trip through America is “already becoming an *allegory of life*” (1999 [1968]: 19, 72; my emphases). As some critics have argued, self-conscious literary nonfiction is “a response to an epistemological crisis” and it has become a textual form or “voice” for challenging “taken-for-granted assumptions” concerning our phenomenal world (see Hartsock 2000: 15). In this sense, the modes like the new journalism or the nonfiction novel represent a specific kind of literary response to the critical social and cultural phenomena of the American sixties and seventies, to events like the civil rights movement, political assassinations and political conventions, the drug culture and the counter culture, Women’s Liberation, the space program and the moon flight, and the War in Vietnam.

A similar kind of conclusion concerning the issues of literature and reality is reached by a host of American writers during the sixties. In his collection of essays, *Cannibals and Christians* (1966), Mailer reflects upon “a literature which grappled with a peculiarly American phenomenon – a tendency of American society to alter more rapidly than the ability of its art-

⁶⁰ We should note that Zavarzadeh labels such novelists as Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and John Updike as belonging to the tradition of “the liberal-humanist novel,” whereas John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and Thomas Pynchon represent the camp of radically innovative “supramodernist” transfiction. What is more interesting, however, is that in addition to Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy* and Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Zavarzadeh categorizes Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night* as a central literary manifestation of the supramodernist nontotalizing sensibility in (post)modern American writing (see 1976: 3-4). As David Lodge also puts it, “[t]he non-fiction novel and fabulation are *radical forms* which take their impetus from an extreme reaction to the world we live in – *The Armies of the Night* and *Giles Goat-Boy* are equally products of the apocalyptic imagination. The assumption behind such experiments is that our ‘reality’ is so extraordinary, horrific or absurd that the methods of conventional realistic imitation are no longer adequate” (1986 [1971]: 33). It is rather easy to see, however, that Lodge juxtaposes here ‘apocalyptic imagination’ and ‘realistic imitation,’ rather unproblematically dispensing with possibilities of the latter mode. He consequently comes to the rather questionable conclusion that Mailer’s and Barth’s texts are *equally* fabulative.

ists to record that change” (CC 121).⁶¹ Mailer clearly precedes Zavarzadeh’s notion of the hopeless situation of the traditional, realistic, and liberal-humanist novel, as in his view that “[t]he sound, sensible, morally stout delineation of society which one found in Tolstoy and Balzac and Zola, in Thackeray and in Trollope, had become impossible” (CC 121-122). Mailer then charts the failure of any American writer (including the failure of the heroic attempts of Theodore Dreiser) to succeed in doing “the single great work which would clarify a nation’s vision of itself” (CC 125). Mailer even anticipates – in his critique of “moral seriousness” of “the realistic novel” represented by Bellow and Malamud – Zavarzadeh’s opinion that the traditional liberal-humanist novel is incapable of dealing with the complexities of contemporary experience. He also constructs a basis for Zavarzadeh’s thesis on the nonfiction novel and transfiction in his vision of the coming literary situation where “one does not speak of the novel of manners any longer – one is obliged to look at the documentary, *In Cold Blood* – or one is obliged to look at satire” (CC 126, 128).

However, in contrast to Zavarzadeh, Mailer’s final conclusion amounts not to an optimistic celebration of new literary forms but rather to a grim and baffled sense that *literature had failed* in the age of the electronic mass media. As I will suggest later in this study, *The Armies of the Night* is Mailer’s symptomatic attempt to write literature in this media age but, paradoxically, this kind of literature is strongly influenced by film and television. It is in such a context that Mailer employs his metaphor of “cannibals and Christians” which provides the title to his collection:

Yes, the cannibal sons of the immigrants had become Christians, and the form they had evolved for their mass-media, the hypocritical empty and tasteless taste of the television arts they beamed across the land encountered the formless form and the all but tasteless taste of the small-town tit-eating cannibal mind at its worst, and the collision produced schizophrenia in the land. [...] And the important art in America became the art of the absurd (CC 129).

The vision of the absurd and schizophrenic situation in contemporary America is taken by Zavarzadeh (and many others) for the reality which can be accurately reflected and recorded, thus producing new forms of

⁶¹ Two other famous novelists reflecting upon the complex relation between literary imagination and reality representation are Philip Roth and John Barth. Roth’s early essay “Writing American Fiction” (1961) deals with the American writer’s problems in trying to make American reality credible, seeing Mailer’s turn away from the novel and towards journalism as one problematic example of this development. Barth’s much-cited essay “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967) has been read as a manifesto of the movement from realism towards postmodernist fabulation.

literary and other art. Mailer is, however, speaking of “[t]he American consciousness in the absence of a great tradition in the novel” (CC 128) and of the failure of the American novelist to depict and comprehend the complex vision of the nation. Mailer’s conclusion in this piece represents a direct opposition to Zavarzadeh’s celebration of the art of the absurd and the schizophrenic.

As we have seen, in *The Mythopoeic Reality* Zavarzadeh argues (more or less persuasively) that the bipolar fictional/factual approach is no longer capable of dealing with current literary realities. Instead of attaching the nonfiction novel either to the fictional or factual mode in any direct way, Zavarzadeh proposes that works like Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night* or Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (both published in 1968) represent the *fictual* and *bi-referential* mode “becoming the concrete narrative correlative for the fictuality of the present times” (1976: 57). We should note that the American nonfiction artists of the sixties started to write in the context of the new media technology and the mass media, but also in a new literary scene, with variants like postmodernist metafiction, *nouveau roman*, “magic realism,” and “The Death of the Novel.” When speaking of self-reflexivity in the American nonfiction of the 1960s and 1970s, it may thus be useful to compare nonfiction with postmodernist fiction, without making any direct claims about the *similarity* between these modes. In any case, we may contemplate Zavarzadeh’s claim that as a “registration” of the contemporary reality experience, “the nonfiction novel is a distinctly postmodern genre” (ibid.: 227). John Hellmann goes so far as to discuss nonfiction in the context of postmodernist fiction, because the aims and techniques appear to be similar in both textual types, producing “nonrealistic fables” of a “postmodern reality.” Thus, “a journalistic subject could be presented factually through a whole range of styles, from Didion’s precise melancholia to Wolfe’s pyrotechnic playfulness, from Mailer’s existential drama to Thompson’s comic bestiality” (1986: 53). Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail ’72* and Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song* represent a new kind of literary-journalistic mode, namely *postmodern journalism*, which “presents a direct confrontation of fact with form, of world with consciousness, of journalism with fiction” (ibid.: 59). However, Hellmann’s view of the similarity between “postmodernist” nonfiction and postmodernist fiction does not do justice to the complexities of either phenomenon.

From various viewpoints, postmodernist fiction and so-called postmodernist nonfiction seem to converge. We are, of course, speaking of the age of entropy, chaos, paranoia, conspiracy, and apocalypse, but it still remains

an important endeavor to try to distinguish the fabrications of postmodernist fiction from more factual-based and referential nonfiction. To take the major example of American postmodernist fiction, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) proceeds to the Zone, to a free imaginative collapsing of all distinctions between historical events (the ending of the Second World War) and paranoid fantasy and between real-life persons and cartoon-like characters. Finally, at the end of the novel, it is obvious that *we*, the reader and the characters, are not in the so-called empirical world but have "always been at the movies (haven't we?)" (Pynchon 1995 [1973]: 760). In fact, anything can happen, because the *ontological* constructions of the world have broken down. According to Brian McHale's well-known but rather broad distinction, modernism's epistemological and cognitive questions have been transformed into postmodernism's ontological and postcognitive problems (see 1992: 32-33).⁶² Emphatically, we should stress that nonfiction's relation to what did or did not happen must remain an *epistemological* question, for we ultimately need to confront the problem that arises if we believe in an overall fictionality of history: "We land in the ultimate dystopia, a world where we cannot make a distinction between what is false and what is true, what happened and what did not happen" (Doležel 1998b: 792). A dystopia whose foundational idea is an imaginative merging of false and true, what happened and what did not happen, is a highly conscious construction of Pynchon's eminent postmodernist novel.

Obviously, some works representing "postmodernist" nonfiction are not so far away from Pynchon's world-construction. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Wolfe's ambiguous reportage of a psychedelic bus trip across the United States in 1964, constructs the event as a self-conscious "movie" from the LSD-filled viewpoint and experience of the colorful participants of that expedition. For the participants, it is "a fantasy world *already*, this electro-pastel world," and they are all "characters in their own movies or the Big Movie" (1999 [1968]: 39, 77). According to Zavarzadeh's reading, Kesey and his company "attempt to construct a counter-reality" and "they neutralize a fictitious reality by releasing their wildest fantasies"; thus the book itself "is based on a dual perspective or double mode of narration which counterpoints the 'factual' with the 'fictional,' and releases the 'fictuality' of the total experience" (1976: 131, 145). As suggested above, Wolfe constructs his characters' minds in this book by using self-

⁶² An *ontological* level is concerned with questions like "what is the ontological status of texts, events, texts as events generating historical events, social structures etc.?" whereas an *epistemological* level is concerned with questions like "what type of knowledge do we obtain from the sources, what do they witness?" (Larsen 1998: 72).

consciously ‘fictionalizing’ techniques (focalization, psycho-narration, free indirect discourse) as they have never been used in a work that is still meant to be read as nonfiction. Thus Wolfe reads reality much in the same way as his characters see it through their chemical filters. What makes *Acid Test* especially famous as a literary experiment is its “linguistic pyrotechnics” and visual techniques such as iconic typography, which aim at reflecting or evoking the hallucinatory minds of the characters: “[T]he thought slips into Norman’s flailing flash-frayed brain stem :: the human lung cannot go beyond this :: [...], his eardrums ring like stamped metal with it and suddenly *Ghhhhhhwoooooooooowwwwww*, it is like the whole thing has snapped” (1999 [1968]: 205). It should be noted that the Norman here is not Norman Mailer.

Representing a similar type of postmodernist nonfiction/journalism, Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971), subtitled “A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream,” also constructs a realm of possibilities where different levels of reality and experience are merged. The very beginning of the book sets the tone: “We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold” (Thompson 1993 [1971]: 3). The narrator, in the disguise of one Raoul Duke (who in the middle of the narrative is revealed to be Hunter S. Thompson) proceeds to explain that he is in fact going to cover a National Conference on Drugs for *Rolling Stone*. As John Hartsock puts it, Thompson’s account “reads as a glib, drug-induced mock heroic in the picaresque tradition in which ultimately the American dream is found to be empty” (2000: 163). While the experience of contemporary American reality (through the eyes and mind of Duke/Thompson) may turn out to be as full of absurdity and paranoia as Pynchon’s fictions, this reality is still not taken into the realm of the fictional world and its ontologies. Rather, the narrative raises the epistemological question of the state of things in society, which the reporter tries but mainly fails to find an answer for. Duke, or Thompson, emerges as an utterly unreliable author-narrator-character, not only because he pays so little attention to his journalistic profession but also because his perception of the world and its objects is warped and distorted, full, as it were, of unnatural colors, glaring hallucinations produced by LSD and various other acids. Yet this kind of world-perception belongs to the art and aesthetics of Thompson’s nonfictional writing.⁶³ Thompson also makes a self-reflexive

⁶³ “As narrator, this persona – usually disordered by drugs – was an obviously unreliable witness who thus freed his creator to bring an expressionistic vision to the world of journalistic observation” (Hellmann 1986: 58); “[i]n his drug-induced narratives, [Thompson is] challenging the very notion of what qualifies as the correct state of consciousness (sobriety) in reporting on the world” (Hartsock 2000: 201).

parody of journalistic conventions by embedding an “Editor’s Note” in the classic style of a “found manuscript” typical of ‘factual fictions’: “*In the interest of journalistic purity, we are publishing the following section just as it came off the tape – one of many that Dr. Duke submitted for purposes of verification – along with his manuscript*” (1993 [1971]: 161). The reader may believe that the tape recording and the manuscript actually exist (providing the basis for this narrative) or note that this device is framed by the work as a whole, making for self-conscious journalism rather than imaginative fiction.

Metanarratives and Frameworks

According to Linda Hutcheon, postmodernist fiction problematizes the fixed notions and conventions of both realism and modernism by turning to itself and to history:

What I want to call postmodernism in fiction paradoxically uses and abuses the conventions of both realism and modernism, and does so in order to challenge their transparency, in order to prevent glossing over the contradictions that make the postmodern what it is: historical and metafictional, contextual and self-reflexive, ever aware of its status as discourse, as a human construct (1988: 53).

A major feature of ‘historiographic metafiction,’ to employ Hutcheon’s concept, is its functioning inside certain conventions while it self-reflexively problematizes those very conventions. Postmodern art often also includes its own theory, a critical and renewing reflection of its own devices and practices, being therefore not only metadiscursive but also metatheoretical. A constitutive feature of metafiction is that it aims “simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction,” and this practice brings the traditionally distinct modes of creation and criticism together (see Waugh 1996 [1984]: 6). Mark Currie accordingly uses the term *theoretical fiction* when speaking of such fiction which also functions (implicitly or explicitly) as a theory of fiction, usually in a self-conscious and metafictional way; thus it “enacts or performs what it wishes to say about narrative while itself being a narrative” (1998: 52).⁶⁴ It is, however,

⁶⁴ It is possible to argue, however, that the aim of fiction is, basically, to create a fictional world, to form a narrative and to tell a story (representing *something*). In this sense a “pure” theory is always something else and also reveals itself in a theorist’s inability to actually tell a story. Thus there are examples of “academic” fiction, which is self-conscious about its techniques and innovations, but does not quite turn into fictional narrative (see Currie 1998: 61). In Robert Alter’s words, “to devise a way of saying, ‘Look, I’m

possible, to draw at least a tentative distinction between *meta-nonfiction* and metafiction.

Metafiction can be defined as a mode that explores the conditions of its own making, foregrounding the process of textual production, and employs the authorial narrator as a visible figure both on the textual and the story level. In various ways, metafiction draws the reader's attention to the author's act of composing words, structures, and narrative worlds, often explicitly making this composition the very subject matter, sometimes even the very plot of the narrative. In addition, metafiction can be defined as a self-conscious literary form that draws the reader's attention to the text's artificial nature and to the problematic relationship between fiction and reality; it is "fiction that includes within itself a commentary of its own narrative and or/linguistic identity" (Hutcheon 1984: 1). In Robert Alter's seminal study *Partial Magic*, a self-conscious novel is defined as "a novel that systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice and that by so doing probes into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality" (1975: x). As Ross Chambers notes, literary texts may produce their own narrative situation by repetition, reflection, and mirroring of all kinds, often including quite explicit metanarrative commentary, and containing various "models" for their reading and interpretation (see 1984: 28-29). It is also a typical feature of self-conscious metafiction to be conscious of the literary conventions it uses and abuses, thus exposing its methods and devices; this is the classical novelistic practice of what the Russian Formalists call "laying bare the device" (see Shklovsky 1998 [1929]: 98, 147). While metafictional procedures derive from Cervantes, Fielding, Sterne, and Diderot, it may be argued that postmodernist metafictions draw the reader's attention even more intensely to literary conventions, often explicitly positioning the reader in the signification process.

Speaking of the relations between fiction and reality, Marie-Laure Ryan differentiates three discourse types that represent opposite points in fiction/nonfiction practices: (1) texts which claim to be factual and direct this claim to the reader (e.g., historiography, biography, journalism, scientific discourse); (2) texts which send a blurred message according to which they are not factual but pretend to be (cf. classical/realistic novel); and (3) texts that make it explicit that they are fictional rather than factual through overt textual marks and devices (postmodernist fiction, self-conscious metafiction)

writing a novel,' could conceivably be no more than a mannerism, a self-indulgent game" (1975: xiv). As Charles Newman puts it, a fiction that challenges only its own aesthetic conventions becomes as suspect as one which pretends to be a direct reflection of reality, "just as an x-ray can be quite as boring as a mirror" (1985: 196).

(see Ryan 1997: 181). The relationship between *postmodernist metafiction* (3) and *nonfiction* (1) would appear to be an interesting one, since some self-conscious nonfictions also break the reader's access to the reality illusion by drawing the reader's attention to the construction of the textual work itself. In contrast to these modes, *classical/realistic fiction* (2) creates this very illusion of the "world" which is not questioned by self-reflexive allusions to the actual world or to other fictions. Basically, postmodernist metafiction (3) seems to subvert both other forms, (1) and (2), that is, nonfiction's literal truth-claims and the make-believe illusion of classic fiction. However, metafiction cannot appear only as "itself"; even the most experimental metafictions need other texts (subtexts) and some concept or idea of *the world*, actual or imaginary (cf. *ibid.*: 182). My own concern with "meta-nonfiction" thus pertains to a complex textual type which belongs to the same period and context as postmodernist fiction. Meta-nonfiction has its links to realistic novels and their reality-illusion storytelling; but, like metafiction, it is constructed upon allusions to other texts; and, what is more, it has its links to the actual world and its documents.⁶⁵

However, self-reflexive nonfiction, a "meta-factual" text (Zavarzadeh 1976: 123), or "meta-nonfiction" (Lehman 1997: 179), has its own ways of functioning. Typically, it tells the story of its own becoming, so that "[t]he underlying drama becomes the story of the writing of the text" (Anderson 1987: 35). In her tentative definition of what may be called self-reflexivity in nonfiction, Hutcheon singles out texts like Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* which show self-consciousness about their writing process and which foreground the historical presence of their participating author. For her, in *Armies*, "self-reflexivity does not weaken, but on the contrary, strengthens and points to the direct level of historical engagement and reference of the text" (Hutcheon 1988: 117; cf. Currie 1998: 64). There are, apparently, some clear differences between self-reflexive nonfiction and self-reflexive metafiction. The most radical examples of American metafiction (Raymond Federman's *Double or Nothing* [1971], William Gass' *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* [1971], or Walter Abish's *Alphabetical Africa* [1974]) highlight the physical act of typing the words, foreground the graphic visuality of the page, play with numbers and alphabets, and in various other ways emphasize their presence as literary artifacts. Whereas postmodernist fiction may maintain its purely textual status, without any obligation to refer to ex-

⁶⁵ There is some reductiveness in Robert Augustin Smart's statement that "the nonfiction novel [...] is always metafictional" (1985: 12). In my view, *non-fiction* and *meta-fiction* overlap but do not coincide.

tratextual reality, so-called meta-fiction refer both to its own textuality and to the actual world outside the text.

Self-reflexive devices may take a form of their own in nonfictions where the author-narrator is also the reporter-novelist trying to write the story we are reading. Daniel Lehman suggests that while the personalized and characterized author of fiction (e.g., Auster, Calvino, Nabokov, Vonnegut) “appears to foreground the fictivity or constructedness of fiction,” the writer of nonfiction like Tim O’Brien “appears to want to force his readers to confront the factuality (or historical implication) that grows out of his Vietnam experience” (1997: 181). Thus the “fun and playfulness” (Scholes 1979: 213) of this kind of device in much postmodernist fabulation and metafiction takes an apparently different technical, rhetorical, and ethical effect in nonfiction. This effect is created when, for example, the author’s appearance on the story level is rather directly based on, or related to, his or her actual experiences. We may of course note that Kurt Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five* uses his appearance in the story-world accordingly – “That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book” (1977 [1969]: 86) – even basing this appearance on his own actual experiences in the middle of the horrors of Dresden, but that self-reflexive ploy does not make the novel function as nonfiction.⁶⁶ Nor does its rhetorical effect on the reader function in an equally direct, painful, and real way as the experiences of O’Brien or Michael Herr in Vietnam (*Dispatches*), Joan Didion (*Salvador*), or Oscar Lewis (*The Children of Sanchez*). This distinct nonfictional effect emerges, as Lehman has it, in the way the author forces his readers to confront the factuality that grows out of the author’s actual experience (cf. Toker 1997: 208). In a more comical, burlesque and adventurous way these kinds of metatextual concerns are in play in the works of Mailer (e.g., *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, *The Fight*), Thompson (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*), and Wolfe (*Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*).

As the metaphoric term *frame* suggests, narrative framing means the device of embedding, or inserting one narrative text within another; in such cases the embedded narrative (Shklovsky’s “inset story” [1998 {1929}: 89]) mirrors the actual text.⁶⁷ The concept of ‘mise en abyme,’ as formulated by

⁶⁶ Compare, however, Bo Pettersson’s view according to which *Slaughterhouse-Five* “is a blend of autobiography and fiction where the traditional distinction between them does not hold” and where “Vonnegut asserts his role as narrator and compiler of the novel’s fiction as well as non-fiction” (1994: 237, 246). It appears, at least in Pettersson’s reading, that it is the real, autobiographical author-narrator Vonnegut who enters the fictional world, thus collapsing the boundary between the actual and the fictional.

⁶⁷ As William Nelles notes, the structural device of the “story within a story,” variously called the “frame” or “embedded” narrative (not to mention more imaginative labels

Lucien Dällenbach following André Gide, may be understood as “a means by which the work turns back to itself, appears to be a kind of *reflexion*”; “its essential property is that it brings out the meaning and form of the work” (1989 [1977]: 8). What may be called a ‘mise en abyme of enunciation’ “brings into focus the narrating agent and the process of the narrative’s production itself as well as the result of an act of artistic production – the text’s structuring and fabrication” (Mikkonen 1997: 23). This tends to happen in the cases of a painting inside a painting (Velázquez’s *Las meñinas*) or a play inside a play (*Hamlet*), not to mention even more common cases where there is a poem inside a poem, a film inside a film, or a novel inside a novel, as in Gide’s *The Counterfeiters*. Accordingly, the “story inside the story” is a frequent device in Mailer’s nonfiction, where the embedded story is principally concerned with the writing of the book in question, as well as in Mailer’s fiction, where the narrator-protagonist’s literary efforts may reflect the actual novel that we are reading.

Authorial self-reflexiveness, a typical feature of postmodernism, can also be seen in the nonfictions of Mailer and Wolfe. This device includes “parodic reflexiveness,” in which a novel parodies and reflects upon its own structure, “the re-creation of reality,” and “the problematics of the book” (Hassan 1987: 85-87). Hence, the emphasis is upon “the problems of composition” and “a critique of the text itself” (Hutcheon 1984: 55). In a way Mailer’s nonfictional narratives, especially those of the 1970s, are self-negating texts which present themselves as *not* novels. Self-reflexivity may thus proceed to the point where the text’s self-critique appears as a kind of negation, problematizing the work in part or as a whole. This happens in the conclusion of *The Prisoner of Sex*, where Mailer notes that the themes of the book are actually “the proper ground of the novel and he would rather try it there” (PS 231). Thus an embedded text (e.g., a fictional novel) reflects and mirrors the actual text in an ironic, parodic, or “negating” way (e.g., Todorov 1977 [1971]: 72-73; Tammi 1985: 47-49; Bal 1991: 26-27; Nelles 1997: 143-144).⁶⁸ In the “Acknowledgments” section of *Marilyn* Mailer’s comment on the generic style and status of the book functions as a kind of negative reflection on the factuality of the narrative we have just read. We may almost feel the author losing his credibility as the sentence goes on: “It is a biography now, a *novel* biography as described, indeed a species of a

such as “Chinese box” or “Russian doll”) is so widely found in literature as to approach universality; obviously, then, this device requires clarification and definition in a given context (see 1997: 1).

⁶⁸ As Hassan suggests, this kind of reflexive technique was probably developed and certainly perfected by Samuel Beckett: “The conclusion of his [...] novel, *How It Is*, is that the book is really about ‘*How It Wasn’t*’” (1987: 9-10).

novel, for a formal biography can probably not be written in less than two years since it can take that long to collect the facts” (M 257).

Gérard Genette suggests that the presence of narrative embedding may qualify as one of the few formal criteria for differentiating fictional from factual narratives. Thus, for Genette, “the presence of the metadiegetic narrative is thus a fairly plausible index of fictionality” (1993 [1991]: 69; cf. Nelles 1997: 2, 164n). However, we may again distinguish here between “purely” factual narratives following more or less strict epistemological constraints (narratives presented by one authorial voice) and such literary nonfictions which more freely play with novelistic conventions without eliminating their documentary basis. Mailer sometimes constructs his narrative upon a large amount of documentary material (interviews, transcriptions, letters, diaries, journalistic reportages and so on), but these texts are merged together not *only* in order to create a literary form and aesthetic effect but also in order to reflect upon the different versions and representations that they offer about the real-life case. In *Oswald’s Tale* Mailer, or the voice of the author-narrator, explicitly refers to the complexities and partial usefulness of the notorious reports of the Warren Commission, so that “the twenty-six volumes will also be a Comstock Lode of *novelistic material*, [...] certainly to be honored for its short stories, historical vignettes, and vast cast of characters” (OT 351; my emphasis). While the historical interest of the reports is retained, Mailer also uses them as his embedded texts so that they provide vignette embellishments to his actual narrative. Similarly in *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man*, Mailer uses Fernande Olivier’s book *Souvenirs Intimes* as an embedded narrative which gives its own viewpoint on the main character. In fact, Mailer suggests that in Olivier’s text “there is an elevated hint of the romance novel – indeed, it is an elegant example of the form” (PPYM 147; see also Krauss 1998: 222). The author’s voice, style, and intent emerge here through his selecting, organizing, and arranging of these often separate materials into an integral literary work.

Various “paratexts” surround literary narratives, such as prefaces, afterwords, and notes that structure narrative textuality, and to these also belong several effects produced by such textual features as title pages, epigraphs, tables of contents, dedications, and so on.⁶⁹ Genette suggests that the “indexes” of fiction are not all *textual* in nature, since, quite typically, “a fictional text declares itself to be such by *paratextual* marks that protect the reader from any misunderstanding; the generic indication ‘a novel’ on a title

⁶⁹ According to Genette, it is a crucial part of the narratological analysis of factual narratives that the paratextual signs of those texts are taken into consideration (see 1993 [1991]: 57).

page or cover is one example among others” (1993 [1991]: 79). Obviously, nothing prevents the author from using these paratextual signs in a self-conscious or parodic vein, so that a work of fiction may announce itself to be “a biography” (e.g., Wolfgang Hildesheimer’s *Marbot: A Biography*), or a work of nonfiction may reflect upon itself as a novel. It is a characteristic feature of Mailer’s style that the discussion of the type and form of a given text is often inscribed inside the medium itself – it is through self-reflexion that Mailer’s works define their generic type. His paratextual signs can direct the reader’s interpretation of a given text, even though his generic definitions are often self-consciously complicated: “The Novel as History/History as a Novel” (*The Armies of the Night*), “An Informal History” (*Miami and the Siege of Chicago*), “A Novel Biography” (*Marilyn*), “A True-Life Novel” (*The Executioner’s Song*), “An Imaginary Memoir” (*Of Women and Their Elegance*), “An American Mystery” (*Oswald’s Tale*), or “An Interpretive Biography” (*Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man*). In a broader sense, there are more extratextual paratexts including interviews or biographical materials that also may “frame” the reader’s interpretation of the text – if only they are known to the reader.

As already suggested in the introduction to my thesis, Mailer’s nonfictional narratives contain different kinds of *implicit* reflections – and many of the textual paratexts belong to these – while they are also framed by more *explicit* reflections belonging to the extratextual realm of literary production and reception. All these devices influence and to a certain extent direct the reader’s approach to the text, thus participating in the large and complex process of “reflexive” reading.

Reflexive Reading of Self-Reflexive Texts

When exploring the relation between postmodernist fiction and nonfiction, Lars Ole Sauerberg also considers specific kinds of reading experience that these metatextual strategies seem to provoke:

The metafictional and documentary devices so popular in postmodernist fiction derive their effect from thwarting familiar expectations. What happens in the reading of metafiction, documentary realism, and nonfiction ‘fiction’ is that the reader is invited or obliged to re-align his bearings by contextualizations different from those of traditional realistic fiction. In the case of metafiction the fictional text becomes indistinguishable from its critical reading, because the two are inextricably woven together (2001: 99-100).

When, as Sauerberg notes, self-conscious texts (like the ambiguously labeled ‘nonfiction fiction’ in his scheme) become indistinguishable from their critical reading, the text itself suggests a model of its reading. Even if most texts have power to produce “their appropriate reading situation” (Chambers 1984: 24), they do so in a vast variety of ways. Thus nonfiction calls its representational aims into question in its depiction of actual events; thereby it also calls for reflexivity on the part of the reader.

If one talks in terms of “literary production,” the author is viewed as a working artist conscious of his or her tools of production and of those genres and conventions he or she shares with others in specific literary institutions and cultural contexts.⁷⁰ Catherine Belsey argues that the question of the original working process of the author remains irrelevant from a textualist viewpoint or that of “a purely critical practice.” Instead, she emphasizes “the production of meaning by the work of *reading* the text, in which the text constitutes the raw material to be transformed by the critic” (1990 [1980]: 139). The fact that Mailer transformed his journalistic pieces into novelistic, literary works in given social and material conditions remains a worthwhile subject in the field of biographical studies, but it is not the aim of this study to do scrupulous research concerning those very conditions.⁷¹ Nor does the “reduction” of the author’s role to a textual one in any logical way constitute an implication that there is (or was) no real author behind the literary production. *The Executioner’s Song* serves as an apt example of such literary-nonfictional production which reflects both the absence of its author and the process of transforming large amounts of material into an artistic form. As has been suggested in studies on the book, “[i]t is as if Mailer, rather than writing a book, chooses to present us with the material he would have to work from in writing a book” (Anderson 1987: 121), and “the process of production of *The Executioner’s Song* is revealed in the narrative, since the second half (book 2) is ‘about’ how the information in book

⁷⁰ In traditional discourse, however, literary value is seen as something “transcendent,” as if deprived of the actual contexts of production and reception of the literary text and from “the immediate context of its origin” (Ellis 1974: 44). From the viewpoint of literary pragmatics, on the other hand, the reader aims to understand the dimensions of the author’s semantic intentions by studying the sociohistorical context of a literary text’s origination (see B. Petterson 1999b: 57).

⁷¹ Of course, we should emphasize the fact that some of Mailer’s books of nonfiction are “transformations” of separate magazine articles, and the separateness of those articles is even reflected in the structural division we find in these books. Thus, *The Armies of the Night* brings together two pieces of reportage, “The Steps of the Pentagon” and “The Battle of the Pentagon”; in *Of a Fire on the Moon*, which is divided into three parts (“Aquarius,” “Apollo,” and “The Age of Aquarius”) we similarly see how the original journalistic material is collected. In fact, questions of reportage and combining separate parts together belong to the authorial self-reflection in these works.

I was gathered,” or, “in short, how the text itself came to be” (Frus 1994: 189).⁷² As I will suggest in my chapter on *Executioner*, the book seems to lend itself, as it were, to a deconstructionist reading, only to complicate the reader’s purely textual approach to its meaning-making.

In *S/Z* Roland Barthes states that “the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (1975 [1970]: 4). Barthes famously makes a distinction between the passive consumer of the readable (*lisible*) classical realist text and the active producer of meaning in the case of the writable (*scriptible*) text.⁷³ While my approach to literary nonfiction hardly represents poststructuralist theory and deconstructive reading, and while the Barthesian notion of realism (shared by Belsey) is somewhat reductive, I concur in Belsey’s view that deconstruction can also function as a concrete and pragmatic tool for textual analysis because it exposes the artifice of “natural” and “transparent” reality representation.⁷⁴ In the recent renaissance of self-reflexivity, self-criticism, and metacommentary as inherent parts of a work of art, the author is often observed to comment not only upon the methods but also upon the materials of textual production. Let me quote an extended paragraph from Stanley Aronowitz, with its insight into Mailer’s self-reflexive practice:

As the artist becomes more reflexively objective, that is, recognizes the commodity character of her or his work, the delineation of the narrative codes as well as the ideological problematic immanent in the text occur simultaneously in the writing, so that the author takes herself as her own object. This self-critical mode is expressed well in Norman Mailer’s self-characterization, *Advertisements for Myself*. Here the author sees himself as object, as commodity, and, from within, transforms the novel into criticism and back again. When Mailer comments on a mass demonstration or, indeed, upon a cultural controversy such as feminism, it is clear that the event con-

⁷² This kind of self-reflexive text has the power to explore the conditions of its own production, being concerned “above all with a reflexive awareness of the conditions of meaning-construction” (Currie 1995: 15). A self-reflexive narrative may thus present itself “as a work whose main subject was its own production,” foregrounding “the materiality of the text” (Dällenbach 1989 [1977]: 32, 49).

⁷³ There is no need, in this study, to follow Barthes’s metaphorical models too closely. For example, Barthes hardly proves to be practically helpful, at least for my thesis, with his effusive claim that it is hard to find any *actual* “writable” texts, but rather “[t]he writerly is the novelistic without the novel, poetry without the poem, the essay without the dissertation, writing without style, production without product, structuration without structure” (1975 [1970]: 5). We may also recall serious inadequacies in Barthes’s essay “The Discourse of History” as discussed above.

⁷⁴ This notion of the reading process is also at the background of Jacob Mey’s theory of literary pragmatics, according to which “the reader is ‘present at the creation’ of the poetic work: he or she is always already there, not only in the sense of being the ultimate addressee of the poet’s endeavors (the ‘reader’ in the strict sense), but also as the future co-producer, as a participant in the creative activity, a co-creator of the work” (2000: 29).

forms not to some social or historical process, but to the canon of literary discourse. It is Mailer, not the siege of the Pentagon, who constitutes the subject of discourse. The event is the raw material out of which meaning will be produced (1994: 50).

Although I shall focus on slightly different problematics from that of Aronowitz and other cultural critics of contemporary postmodernity, we are still reflecting upon the crucial, shared issues that prevail in our times. And although Aronowitz's reference to *Advertisements* (Mailer's first miscellany) as "a novel" does not withstand close scrutiny – for not everything can be a novel – his general emphasis upon Mailer's literary production corresponds to my thesis: in Mailer's work, which transforms factual materials into literary forms, a specific historical event functions as "the raw material out of which meaning will be produced."

Another theorist approaching complex contemporary narratives from a social and cultural perspective asks for more reflexive reading on the part of literary critics, using Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* as one of his focal texts. These texts are not autonomous from the real world nor simple reflections of it, but rather reflections on a world in which different competing texts and narratives are at play. In his study *Fifteen Jugglers, Five Believers*, T.V. Reed suggests that literary texts should no longer be fetishized as autonomous art but rather be analyzed as part of a rhetorical continuum where different kinds of writing produce differing kinds of textual and political power. There is an implication in Reed's theory that the interpretation of specific and particular texts, like those problematizing the traditional notions of factual and fictional writing, require a combination of "textual and rhetorical criticism" emerging from such various sources as formalism, deconstruction, and reader-response theory. On one level, there is a text's attempt to impose its mode of reading on the reader, and, on the other level, there are social relations created in specific contexts of reception. Reed seeks a distinct kind of postmodernist *realism*, which is "at once a mode of writing and a mode of reading, one that features self-reflexive, realism-disrupting techniques but places those techniques in tension with 'real' cognitive claims and with 'realistic,' radically pragmatic political needs" (1992: 18).⁷⁵ The fact that Reed discusses "postmodernist" self-reflexivity of the literary form and the reflexivity of reading in the case of *The Armies of the*

⁷⁵ In Reed's reading, James Agee and Walker Evans's classic photojournalistic work *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* asks "readers to reflect on their preconceptions, and by so doing to draw them into closer reading," and what we are confronting here is "one of the key strategies of the text – the attempt to create in the reader reflexivity in the place of mere reflex" (1992: 25). Agee himself writes in the foreword to his narrative text that this is "an effort in human actuality, in which the reader is no less centrally involved than the authors and those of whom they tell" (1988 [1941]: xvi).

Night, among other works, gives me one starting point for my delineation of the characteristic features and formal complexities of Mailerian nonfiction.

Postmodernist writing has been connected to the anti-mimetic rhetorical tradition and regarded as a form which allows the intellectual space for readers seeking for knowledge rather than entertainment. Thus Ronald Sukenick writes that “*narrative as rhetoric*, in its consideration of relation to an audience, is interactive” and “more frankly democratic in its literary aspect than narrative as entertainment” (2000: 5; my emphasis). In fact, this kind of “interactive” (and ideally “democratic”) practice is a common feature in American literature from Whitman to Mailer, John Dos Passos’s trilogy *U.S.A.* functioning as a kind of signpost between them. As Shelley Fisher Fishkin writes:

Dos Passos wanted to teach his readers to challenge the authority of the many attractive but misleading “texts” that surround him. He wants him to learn to see the gaps between the glowing rhetoric of school books and the shameful injustices they ignore; between the glossy promises of advertising and propaganda and the grim realities they mask; between the lyrics of popular songs or the scripts of Hollywood’s films and the complexities of life and love that they deny. By constantly challenging the authority of these and other ‘texts,’ Dos Passos, like Whitman (whom he admired greatly), pushes each reader to become an active producer of the text of his own (1985: 204; my emphasis).⁷⁶

The Executioner’s Song asks for the reader’s production of his or her own interpretation when dealing with the complex case of murder and execution. Furthermore, we may see how Mailer’s book intertextually locates itself into the tradition of American modernism and naturalism (cf. Schleifer 1989; Pizer 1993: 174). Thus Dreiser turned his experiences as a journalist to the precise, fact-based representation of modern America (e.g., in *An American Tragedy* [1925], which also deals with a real-life case of murder and execution); in his *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930-1936), Dos Passos used a montage technique comprised of fragments from newsreels, prose poems, journalistic reportage, and popular lyrics in order to create a multilayered,

⁷⁶ Fishkin’s illuminating study *From Fact to Fiction: Journalism & Imaginative Writing in America* suggests that American literature often positions the reader inside the text, giving him or her an active part of the text’s meaning-making. What connects many of the classical and modernist American writers (including Whitman, Twain, Dreiser, Hemingway, and Dos Passos) is that they have written both factual newspaper journalism and imaginative fiction or poetry, sometimes bringing these realms together. Thus, “as artists they could rearrange familiar facts and visions, cast them in new lights, place them in larger contexts” and “[c]hallenge the reader’s comfortable habits of thought and ways of understanding the world” (Fishkin 1985: 217). Fishkin briefly refers to Mailer as part of this tradition; indeed, *The Executioner’s Song* is, in my reading, a postmodernist representative of this American mode.

“cinematic” rendering of social reality (again, there is an actual tragedy of murder and execution among the life stories); and Faulkner, in his most complex novel *Absalom! Absalom!* (1936), constructs various subjective voices without a reliable and authorial narrative viewpoint on the complicated events (including a murder), leaving the reader to gather and combine the fragmented pieces from the restricted versions. The reflexive reader of Mailer’s nonfiction, especially *The Executioner’s Song*, is forced to see in it the plurality, fragmentation, and fluctuating points of view that govern the world of magazines and television, but through its very self-reflexivity the narrative demands the reader’s active response instead of offering passive entertainment.

Among various representations of the entertainment and mass media discourses there may still be “serious” and “artistic” nonfictions which are not easily put together (by their authors) or consumed (by their readers); they are *produced*, in a practice shared by author and reader. These nonfictions typically foreground the ultimate difficulty of dealing with something that actually happened or something really happening at the moment.⁷⁷ Literary nonfiction is a mode which attempts to reestablish the relations between teller, listener, and subject, resulting in “an ongoing negotiation” between the factual event, authorial rhetoric, and readerly response (see Hartsock 2000: 51-52). It is therefore a mode that often foregrounds and makes visible the problems and issues of its own making and production: “Those negotiations, in which experience and manuscript interact, even more than the text’s truthfulness, are what explain *the power and problems of nonfiction*” (Lehman 1997: 35; my emphasis). This dialectical interaction between experience and manuscript, what was in the real world and what is in the text, is the main question of nonfictional poetics and ethics, not only indicating nonfiction’s always inherent problems of composition but also the powers of that composition.

Proposing “a self-reflective mode of reading,” Mieke Bal discusses those art works (paintings in her case) which *subsume* the viewer (or reader) into the work (see 1991: 247-248). Bal’s main example in her discussion of self-reflexivity as a mode of reading is Velázquez’s *Las meñinas*, which famously includes in its composition the artist himself in front of a huge canvas inside the actual canvas and a mirror in the middle of that canvas. The position of the (implied) viewer in Velázquez’s painting (whose inner

⁷⁷ As Michael Herr writes in his work of literary nonfiction, *Dispatches*, “[c]onventional journalism could no more reveal this war [in Vietnam] than conventional firepower could win it, all it could do was take the most profound event of the American decade and turn it into a communications pudding” (1991 [1977]: 218).

mirror reflects the king and queen) has been analyzed by such theorists as Michel Foucault, John Searle, and Stuart Hall. One of the prevailing issues in the analysis of the painting has been the position of the viewer in relation to the reflected image of the king and queen in the center of the work, so that the reader/viewer of *Las meñinas* appears to find his or her own reflection in the painting. Bal, however, warns against such “narcissistic” readings of self-reflexive works: they may relieve the reader of the trouble of placing the work in its historical context and result in diverting attention from issues concerning the real world.⁷⁸ What this also means is that self-reflexive readings should not be an end in themselves, but rather a starting point for further specification, especially for consideration of the relations between the text and the world.

In her book *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative*, Phyllis Frus formulates her thesis about “reflexive reading” as follows:

“Nonfictional” or “true-life” narratives are a likely place to consider these questions and to develop a reflexive reading practice that, in theorizing the satisfactions or problematics of narrative, move beyond formalism to historicize what are usually figured as the “universal,” “transcendent” properties of narrative and the pleasure and knowledge we take from them. Because nonfiction (especially journalism) does not come prewrapped in an aesthetic package, with universal relevance implied, as does any novel, its ties to its particular context are not easily loosened, and generalizations about universal human nature are not readily abstracted from the particulars. A new conception of literariness would view these ties as valuable, instead of something to transcend; the reader would regard the text’s referents as inseparable from its formal means and would make this dynamic relationship central to a reading (1994: 4).

Adopting this kind of conscious and reflexive reading position, the reader pays attention to how journalistic/nonfictional texts emphasize their own

⁷⁸ Therefore, instead of only constructing the reader/viewer’s narcissism through reflexive devices (the viewer shares the position of the king or the queen, as it were), “self-reflection proposes a radical view of the world as itself constructed – which entails a critical perspective on the world and its changeability” (Bal 1991: 257). Apparently, a certain kind of self-reflexion is an inherent feature of what Linda Hutcheon labels *narcissistic* texts. It is as if these narratives, mirroring themselves (and sometimes only seeing their own reflection), want the reader to be a functional part of themselves: “Overtly narcissistic texts make this act a self-conscious one, integrating the reader in the text,” so that “[t]he reader is here involved in a creative, interpretive process from which he will learn how the book is read” (1984: 139). Of course, self-consciousness as “such,” as a playful fictional game (e.g., Barthelme’s *The Snow White*), may be distinguished from various modes of critical (sometimes even “political”) reflexivity represented by some historiographic metafiction and literary nonfictions. As Joseph Tabbi suggests when discussing Mailer’s and Don DeLillo’s postmodernist self-reflexivity (especially in the context of their “documentary fictions”), it is not a question of “a narcissistic reflection; the compositional activity does not seek to *replace* reality with a self-contained aesthetic order” (1995: 183).

production of meaning. We may note that Frus exercises her reflexive reading most effectively in the case of *The Executioner's Song*. She maintains that “the reflexivity of the text inheres on several levels” – in the structure of the text, where the first half is glossed by the second; in the method of narration (we keep being presented different subjective perceptions); and in the very content and subject of the narrative, “which is implicitly about how all our news of the world is mediated [...] by the narrative” (ibid.: 189). Thus Mailer’s narrative exemplifies Frus’s larger thesis that reflexivity is best conceptualized not as a quality but as an open-ended metaphor for indeterminacy, for the dialectic, and for making a complex reality.

Through her emphasis upon the reflexive reading of nonfiction Frus is also probing “a new conception of literariness.” However, her version of the poetics of nonfiction is not the same as mine. Frus’s notion of reflexive reading leads to a concept of self-consciousness which is not so much a property of *texts* but of the actual readers themselves: “Although reflexive readings are by definition self-conscious, this is not to privilege self-conscious texts or formally interesting ones (in a reflexive reading all forms are interesting ones, even those that efface themselves as form), but to emphasize the reading whereby we uncover the processes of production of any text” (1994: 5). In her reading of *The Executioner's Song*, Frus argues that while Mailer’s “enabling of his readers’ reflexive consciousness is his main strategy to counter the tendency of contemporary life to reify consciousness,” still “*reflexivity is not a quality of texts* but the process of one consciousness engaging with another” (ibid.: 180; my emphasis). However, while emphasizing the reflexivity of the reading process, my own focus is simultaneously on self-reflexive textual strategies which always partly produce such reading, drawing the reader’s attention to the textual/literary production. The parallel, or quasi-parallel, and analogous nature of writing and reading – “the creative function to which the text draws attention” (Hutcheon 1984: 39) – may still be most strongly produced by such self-reflexive texts which “make their readers *question* their own (and by implication others’) interpretations” (Hutcheon 1988: 180). Monika Fludernik, for example, combines textual and readerly approaches when arguing that “reflecting” is one of the basic cognitive frames of reading and consequently one of the reader’s ways of “naturalizing” the narrative text, but she adds that “[t]his reading strategy may be actively encouraged by the text if the self-reflexive or meta-narrative mode is a prominent feature of that novel” (1996: 278).⁷⁹

⁷⁹ According to James Phelan’s analysis of Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, the novel, by foregrounding the synthetic component, “guides the authorial audience to reflect on the activity of its own reading” (1989: 142). In Calvino we have

In Daniel Lehman's view, Frus aims to obliterate the supposedly "artificial" boundaries between literature and journalism, between fiction and nonfiction, and between literary and nonliterary texts. Even though Lehman values Frus's concept of reflexive reading, he criticizes her claim according to which "the experience of reading an invented tale is identical to that of reading a historical one" (1997: 4; cf. Frus 1994: 160). Referring to Frus's model of reading, Lehman concludes that it provides "wonderful potential for reading the referential (outside) against the reflexive (inside)," but that it is still flawed because of Frus's textual formalism, which does not allow her to consider the extratextual questions of the accuracy and adequacy of representation (see 1997: 5). What makes the interaction between Lehman and Frus concrete is that they analyze some of the same representative writers of nonfiction (e.g., Didion, Mailer, and Wolfe). However, while Frus reads her subjects more on a textual level, Lehman suggests that a nonfictional communication is a socially implicating act, because it brings writer, subject, and reader together on the level of experience.⁸⁰

As a conclusion to this chapter, we might argue whether nonfictional texts always on some level "construct" and "position" their readers. However this might be, the narratological model of an implied reader (the reader as a textual construction) becomes problematic in the "multilayered" process of reading nonfiction.⁸¹ This experience – because always also individual – is quite hard to pin down as a general hypothesis. Whatever the reader's personal and individual experience is, the main question in the theory of literary nonfiction is still how the text is constructed and how its construc-

an extreme example of a self-reflexive narrative which, for its part, produces "reflexive reading" (ibid.: 148).

⁸⁰ While Frus's whole notion of "nonfiction" appears problematic, I do not completely approve of Lehman's model either, since he seems to be more concerned with the actuality than with the art of nonfictional representation. I try to combine the most valuable parts from each theory of nonfictional narrative, in this case Frus's concern with "formalism" and Lehman's with "ethics."

⁸¹ Bal points out the paradox in a self-reflexive reading: the reader/viewer tends to set his or her critical and active position aside and submit totally to "the self-reflective position seemingly proposed by the work" and to "a position perceived to be determined by the work" (1991: 258). Nevertheless, Barbara Lounsbury, who aims at keeping a strict fiction/nonfiction distinction, sees some relevance in the concept of an implied reader in nonfictional poetics: "The implied reader is [...] both active and passive: active by making the text meaningful, passive since the premises of the text's production are given in its discourse and narration" (1990: 19). Compare also her reference to the concept of a 'model' reader: "The meaning of the text arises in *productive tension* between the role of the model reader the text presents and the historical reader's dispositions and interests" (ibid.). Through these formulations, there would be some fruitful basis for combining the ideas of implied/model reader and "reflexive" reading. I will return to the concepts of narratology's 'implied reader' and rhetorical theory's 'authorial audience.'

tion draws its reader to contemplate that construction and relate to the text's reality representation. In certain self-reflexive literary nonfictions, where the author is also a character in the story (like a reporter gathering the material and writing his or her article), a kind of "double experience" emerges for the reader. As Lehman suggests, it is one of Joan Didion's nonfictional practices to include in the text her own position as writer and her positioning of the reader within that vision. Didion's literary journalism (e.g. *Salvador* [1983]) is an example of a textual form which "insists on the social context of a teller and hearer together by the pool," and this in a way confirms the idea of nonfiction (unlike fiction) as a form which "almost inevitably links its readers and writers in a social and historical – as well as in an artistic – transaction" (Lehman 1997: 142-143). This important notion includes both the reality experience and textual self-reflexion of reading nonfictional narratives, seeing their social/historical referentiality and their individual artistic methods.

In this first section of my study, I have delineated the basic ground for a poetics and pragmatics of literary nonfiction, foregrounding its formal, referential, ethical, aesthetic, and self-reflexive aspects. I have also placed the practices of Mailer and other nonfiction writers in the larger framework of poetics and in the broader literary-historical scheme. In the next section, I will focus in a more detailed way on Mailer's individual narrative poetics and on the reciprocal relationship between fiction and nonfiction in his work.

Chapter II

Mailer's Narrative Poetics: From Fiction to Nonfiction

This chapter presents in a more specific way Mailer's ways of constructing fictional worlds and reconstructing narratives on the basis of factual materials. Opening my discussion with the questions of the author (actual and implied) and the narrator (and different narrative voices), I then proceed to interpret Mailer's fictional worlds and private mythologies and the ways in which they "spill" into his nonfictional constructions. I argue that Mailer's poetics of nonfiction is partly based on the different combinations of imagination and realism which dominate his fiction. In addition, Mailer's self-reflexive nonfiction finds its reflection in his novels dealing with writing (and reading), so that Mailer's fictional novelists often resemble those positions that the author himself takes in his works of nonfiction and shorter pieces of reportage. After demonstrating the intertextual and intratextual links between Mailer's fiction and nonfiction on the level of worlds, myths, and literary conventions, as well as on the level of embedded and framed texts, such as *mise en abyme* constructions dealing with the production of "this book," I will move to a closer analysis of Mailer's nonfictional practice, to the artistry of his essays, journalistic reportages, and novelistic biographies of various complex, enigmatic, and creative figures. In order to do so, I will analyse the narrative and thematic complexities of Mailer's fiction and offer readings of "political" or "biographical" nonfictions like *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, *The Prisoner of Sex*, *St. George and Godfather*, *Marilyn*, *The Fight*, and *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man*, which have been generally overshadowed in Mailer criticism by the author's main works of literary nonfiction.

Mailer's Fiction: Narrative and Thematic Questions

Authorial Roles and Narrative Voices

A literary text is written by a real person so that “the historical author’s physical acts, not the narrator’s, produce the text” (Nelles 1997: 10), but this real person cannot be directly grasped through the text that he or she has written. We can only construe the image of the author through the words and structures of the text, its language and style and construction, which means that the author is “implied” in the text. Wayne Booth’s original coinage of the concept of the *implied author* is meant to characterize the author’s “second self” which is created inside the work and which embodies the text’s norms and values. While the implied author functions (invisibly) on a different level from the narrator, its values do not necessarily depart from those of the narrator. A narrator is “*reliable* when he speaks or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), *unreliable* when he does not” (Booth 1983: 158-159; cf. Olson 2003: 94, 96). Rather than being a technical or formal device (a textual agent like the narrator), the implied author is the system of values behind the ethics and aesthetics of the work.

According to Booth, the reader responds to at least three different “voices” in a narrative text: (1) *the narrator*, who supposes that the listener accepts and receives the story in itself and at the same level; (2) *the implied author*, who is responsible for the narrative construction, its norms and values, and (3) *the real author*, who has actually (and uniquely) produced the text in a certain phase of his or her career (see 1988: 125). As Seymour Chatman defines the concept of the implied author, it is a source of a narrative text’s whole structure of meaning, of its assertion and denotation, of its implication, connotation, and ideological nexus. Chatman’s definitions of the concept are numerous and varying, perhaps even slightly contradictory; on the one hand, the implied author is “the agency within the narrative fiction itself which guides any reading of it”; on the other hand, it is the “source” of the work’s “invention” and also “the locus of the work’s *intent*” (1990: 74; cf. Phelan 2005: 41-42). According to Brian McHale, however, the implied author cannot be conceived as a personal agent who belongs to the model of narrative communication; rather, the term “properly serves

to designate our hypotheses about the total meaning of the text, in other words, the reader's hypothetical reconstruction of the empirical author's norms and values" (1992: 90). In a sense, the implied author functions as an ideal model for the text's intent and values, its structure and art, and it may be "found" or "(re)constructed" through an active and careful reading which follows the text's "guidance."

It is probably appropriate, however, not to ascribe too many tasks to the implied author. Apparently, the most meaningful function that the implied author has in a narrative text can be formulated through its relationship to the narrator or narrative voice. William Nelles attempts to clarify and simplify the concept by defining the implied author as "[that] fictional construct inferred from the text who has consciously created and intended every meaning that the work holds," and stating that "the implied author has consciously created and intended every implication, subtlety, ambiguity, and complexity that can be discovered in the text" (1997: 4, 15). Nelles actually sees the implied author as something fictional, conscious and intentional, and this may sound problematic, for it implies that the "correct" meaning of a literary text is anchored to a fictional construction's conscious intention. The critics of the concept of the implied author, especially those who would want to dispose of the idea altogether, believe that the implied author is another word for authorial intention and the mirror figure of only one correct interpretation, one that the implied author's counterpart, "the implied reader," must produce. However, more recent formulations in the field of a rhetorical theory of narrative, developing and refining Booth's still valuable suggestions, maintain the notion of the implied author (and the implied reader) in theoretical discussion, especially because the simple distinction between the real author and the (fictional) narrator does not explain the complexity of rhetorical communication in narrative texts. Thus, rhetorical reading aims to construct a sense of the implied author in the narrative.¹ Traditionally, of course (and as suggested by Booth), the concept of the implied author works best in the analysis of certain fictions which undermine the reliability of their narrator's voice but which cannot be explained on the basis of the real author's meanings and intentions.

The implied author needs to be defined as an agent charged with a structure of *meaning* (to be interpreted by the implied reader), "especially

¹ More recently, James Phelan has proposed that "the implied author is a streamlined version of the real author, an actual or purported subset of the real author's capacities, traits, attitudes, beliefs, values, and other properties that play an active role in the construction of the particular text" (2005: 45). Indeed, there is in the rhetorical theory of narrative an attempt at "reestablishing a closer link between the flesh-and-blood author and the implied author and regarding the implied author as the agent who is the source of the

when the real meaning of a text is perceived to lie outside the dramatized narrator's intentions (or intrusions), as in the case of an unreliable narrator" (Nelles 1997: 88). The distinction between the author's and narrator's values is often a deliberate narrative technique in fiction; this is a rhetorical case where we see a discrepancy between the author's values and the narrator's voice. Thus Huck Finn is not the single, reliable voice in Mark Twain's novel, but neither can we attribute the text's meanings solely to the real-life author, whose real name is not even Mark Twain. Something exists in between, and we may call this something the *art* of the novel: as readers of *Huckleberry Finn*, we get a glimpse of an implied Twain, which is our image of the writer's art and intention. As Phelan puts it, "[w]e hear Twain's voice behind Huck's because we have heard and seen Twain's values earlier in the narrative," or, "[w]e see Huck as the window through which Twain's artistry is being revealed" (1996: 47, 81). We may also think here of Mailer's "postmodernized" Huck Finn in *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967). The novel presents a fluid and indeterminate narrator-protagonist in the mode of an "electric" colloquial voice occasionally pretending to be D.J. (disc jockey), a white boy from Texas or a black Harlem "Spade." This narrative voice proclaims that "Well, Huckleberry Finn is here to set you straight" (WAWV 8), but concludes that "you never know what vision has been humping you through the night" (WAWV 208). Mailer's D.J./Spade is an extreme instance of an unreliable narrator, for "he" may be supposed not to exist at all, being rather a phenomenon on the ontological levels of electronic circuits. At least, he deceives the reader throughout the narrative: "[M]aybe I'm putting false material into *this* tape recorder, or jamming it – contemplate!" (WAWV 26), and problematizing the activities of both reading and writing: "[I]f you are really reading this and I am really writing it (which I don't know – it's a wise man who knows *he* is the one who is doing the writer's writing)" (WAWV 28). Despite its endless ironies and parodies, in its very title *Why Are We in Vietnam?* implies a problem that cannot be answered by the self-ironizing (and self-destroying) narrative voice. Rather, the implied author asks for the reader's response, or at least tries to activate his audience to produce *some* answers and meanings.² Obviously, then, the

narrative" (ibid.: 47). In my view, this approach makes it possible to reconsider the concept of the implied author in *nonfiction*, where there is a close link between the real and the implied author. I shall return to this question in my subsequent analyses of the ethics and aesthetics of Mailer's nonfiction (e.g., *The Prisoner of Sex* and *Oswald's Tale*).

² It seems to belong to the very intent and construction of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* – as represented by the implied author – that there can be no simple and clear answer to the question proposed by the title. However, behind the narrative voice we may construct Mailer's both "leftist" and "conservative" values – defending, for example, nature against

novel's final message – “Vietnam, hot damn” (WAWV 208) – can be read in very different ways depending on the reader's evaluation of the voice and personality behind it.³

In addition to these classical narratological problems, the field and focus of the present study demands the evaluation of the usefulness of the implied author (and its counterpart, the implied reader) in *nonfictional* communication. Daniel Lehman suggests that the transaction among authors and readers forces the nonfictional narrative onto a multireferential plane that he calls “implicated,” a notion complicating traditional notions of “ideal” or “implied” authors and readers (see 1997: 4). This is a question that I will discuss more closely and pragmatically in the last section of my thesis, especially in the case of *Oswald's Tale* and its mode of rhetorical communication. From a rhetorical viewpoint, the implied author can be understood as the agent responsible for bringing the text into existence and giving it its particular shape (cf. Phelan 2005: 45, 49). In this sense, the concept of the implied author can also be applicable to nonfiction criticism, but perhaps not in the sense of a textual construction functioning “between” the author and the narrator. Nonfiction's narrator should be identified with the real author, and when contemplating the “facts” that the narrative presents about events and people, the reader attributes these narrative claims to the actual writer of the text.

The concept of the *narrator* appears to be problematic in some cases of nonfictional narrative, since it implies the difference of the narrative voice from the authorial voice. And still we may see that “[t]he narrator is the

the pollution of technology and consumerism. Interestingly, Mailer's 2003 pamphlet on the Bush administration and the war in Iraq is given the title *Why Are We at War?* Here, according to Mailer's principles of “good nonfiction,” the author tries to “keep the waters clear” and present his conclusions to the reader. Compare, then: “It is [these] covert motives in the Bush administration upon which I would like to speculate here. I will attempt to understand what the President and his inner cohort see as the logic of their present venture” (WAWW 37). Again, as Mailer's postmodernist *Vietnam* novel suggests, fiction is likely to obfuscate things by presenting its ideology through different voices and perceptions; thus, “you never know what vision has been humping you through the night.”

³ From a rhetorical viewpoint, Mailer may be constructing here such “amiable communities” (Booth 1974b: 10-14), which “get” the parodic, ironical and critical message directed toward the war in Vietnam. As McConnell comments on Mailer's “hipster” ideology and style, “in its sly assumption that the ‘insiders’ will recognize the moralities through the codes in which the moralities are transmitted, parody is, in fact, the classical version of the Hip” (1977: 100). The concluding comment of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* actually derives from Mailer's famous speech at the University of California in 1964 (printed as “A Speech at Berkeley on Vietnam Day” in *Cannibals and Christians*) which parodies President Johnson's visions of the war: “Hot damn. Vietnam” (CC 94). In fact, even this may be interpreted as an allusion to Mailer's earlier work, namely to the conclusion of *The Naked and the Dead*: “The Major [Dalleson] could see every unit in the Army using his idea at last. He clenched his fists with excitement. *Hot dog!*” (ND 717).

most central concept in the analysis of narrative texts” (Bal 1997: 19) and that “‘who speaks?’ is the fundamental question to be addressed by narratology” (Nelles 1997: 132). According to Dorrit Cohn, the author/narrator distinction operates as a basic criterion for segregating fictional from historical narrative, and Gérard Genette, for his part, argues that we should take into account the serious commitment of the author with regard to his narrative assertions. On the basis of Philippe Lejeune’s studies on autobiography, Genette constructs a general formula according to which “ A (author) = N (narrator) \rightarrow factual narrative; $A \neq N \rightarrow$ fictional narrative,” which means simply the equation of author and narrator in factual narratives, and their separation in fiction (see Genette 1990: 766; 1993 [1991]: 69). Similarly Cohn, also referring to Lejeune, sees that the distinction between the narrator’s name and the author’s name conveys fictional intentionality, whereas their identity conveys nonfictional intentionality (see 1999: 59). In this sense, it may be reasonable to employ the term *author-narrator* to designate nonfiction’s narrative stance. For example, Richard Walsh’s notion of the narrator adopts a deliberately polemic attitude toward classic distinctions, claiming that the narrator can only be *either a fictional character* (as in first-person narration) *or the author him- or herself* (as in the case of third-person narrative) (see 1997: 505). This may reduce the complexity of the tools but not that of the problem addressed.

To my mind, as the author of nonfiction makes claims for actuality and truthfulness, his or her narrator is seriously and directly connected to him- or herself as the author of the discourse. Genette’s pattern, according to which in factual narrative there is the serious commitment of the author with regard to his narrative assertions, importantly marks the difference between fictional and nonfictional narration. Walsh, for his part, seems to be suggesting that the same rules of author/narrator relationships exist for both fiction and nonfiction. While it remains the case that only in fiction can there be a character (other than the author) in the story who narrates (e.g., Mikey Lovett in Mailer’s *Barbary Shore*), Walsh’s formula seeks to merge fiction and nonfiction on the level of authorial narration: he holds that there can only be the author as a narrator outside the story world, narrating a representation instead of representing a narration. As I see it, however, the distinction remains: Mailer’s first novel *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) is narrated by an omniscient third-person narrator created by Mailer’s imagination, not necessarily connected with the values of the young author himself. Rather, it is a non-personal “voice” constructed on the basis of the classical novelistic practice, including that of Tolstoy, and under the influence of American realistic fiction (Dreiser, Hemingway, Dos Passos, Farrell). By using the

“omniscience” device, this kind of narrator commands access to the minds of the fictional characters: “To the replacements, *everything* was new and they were miserable. [...] There were three hundred of them and *they all felt* a little pathetic. Everything was *strange*” (ND 42; my emphases).⁴ When it comes to Mailer’s nonfiction, it seems that there is no need to argue that in *The Armies of the Night*, for example, Mailer has created a narrator whose position, voice, and rhetorical/ideological stance is different from his authorial role. Nevertheless, in my chapter on *Armies* I shall focus on the idiosyncratic complexity and reciprocity of the author-narrator-character relationship in that book. But to pursue this issue further, it seems that the narrative voice and position of *The Executioner’s Song* resembles the authorial narration and imagination of *The Naked and the Dead*. In this sense, *Executioner* problematizes Cohn’s strict formal assumption according to which “the reader of a nonfictional narrative understands it to have a stable univocal origin, that its narrator is identical to a real person: the author named on its title page” (1999: 123-124). In spite of Cohn’s and Genette’s linking of the author/narrator distinction to the fiction/nonfiction distinction, the question of the narrator is not enough in itself. Therefore, Mailer’s *Executioner* is not easily turned into the category of fiction because the equation of author and narrator seems to collapse, or at least is problematized in it.⁵

There are different versions of the authorial/narratorial stance in Mailer’s nonfiction: (1) the *character-narrator*, i.e. the participant in the story who tells this story in the first person (e.g., fictions like *The Deer Park* or nonfictions like “Superman Comes to the Supermarket,” even though the common use of “I” is in the latter case for a large part replaced by Mailer’s idiosyncratic use of “one,” for example in “One muttered one’s pleasure” [PP 46]); (2) a *semi-characterized narrator*, who uses the pronoun “I,” like the first-person narrator, but is not himself a part of the story that is being told (e.g., *Marilyn*, *Genius and Lust*, *Picasso* – according to Lehman, “[i]n a sense, all

⁴ Speaking of “omniscience,” Jonathan Culler problematizes the simplified idea of the analogy between God and the author-narrator. As a metaphor, however, omniscience appears to be more appropriate in the case of fictional narration as compared to nonfictional narration, where there cannot be any omniscience – perhaps not even in the case of the Bible. (See Culler 2004: 23, 27)

⁵ Genette, for example, does not believe that the author-narrator distinction serves as “an *index* [...] allowing us to distinguish fiction from nonfiction,” but the relations between author, narrator, and character are “most often inferred from the (other) characteristics of the narrative taken as a whole” (1993 [1991]: 78-79). Lubomír Doležel, however, tries to deepen this Genettean fiction/nonfiction discussion, which remains purely narratological to his mind, arguing that “[Genette’s] conclusion only confirms that narrativity is not a criterion for the fiction/nonfiction distinction,” for “Genette does not mention the existence of a semantic, truth-conditional criterion” (1998a: 26).

nonfiction narrators are homodiegetic" [1997: 49]; cf. Phelan 2005: 216); (3) the *third-person character-narrator*, which may be one of Mailer's most idiosyncratic achievements and inventions in his nonfiction; this is a narrative stance which employs the third person ("he") although the narrator himself is a character in the story that is being told (e.g., *Armies*, *Miami*, *Fire*, and *Fight*); (4) a *heterodiegetic-extradiegetic* narrator, one similar to the typical "omniscient" narration often found in the realist tradition (*The Naked and the Dead* is the sole representative of this type among Mailer's novels; but the notion is also relevant to *Executioner*, which fact complicates the notion that all nonfiction narrators are homodiegetic). The relationship between the content and the narrative stance of individual works of nonfiction should, however, be placed in the context of the handling of the point of view in Mailer's narrative fiction.

Mailer's Fictional Writers

Barbary Shore (1951) introduces Mailer's first narrator-protagonist who is a failed writer, trying to find both public and personal history and some form for his future novel in a claustrophobic Brooklyn roomhouse. This character, called Mikey Lovett, is writing his own novel at the time of the narration ("Now, in the time I write" [BS 11]), attempting to finish *this* book before "they" come. He is writing on the shore of barbarism and on the verge of an American apocalypse, where no one knows what will happen next. We get a vision of Lovett sitting by his desk and writing this narrative, a kind of fictional diary.⁶ Like Tim Madden in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, Mikey Lovett is an amnesiac (because of the war) trying to recognize his scarred "portrait in the mirror" (BS 9) and to remember his past. He has to face the fact that "there were so few pieces and so much puzzle" (BS 9). Also, like Madden (and some other Mailerian narrator-protagonists), he uses his imagination as a would-be writer to "construct an imaginary childhood" (BS 82), and believes that because he has no history, he can create it as he likes: "No history belonged to me and so all history was mine" (BS 9).

The novel Lovett tries to write on an embedded level clearly reflects the actual novel, but inside "this" novel he also discusses another, more optimistic and romantic novel, whose relation to the finally produced narrative is partly ironic. He intends to write "a large ambitious novel" about

⁶"Diary fiction is by its very nature self-reflexive: it reflects its narrator's mind and, as metafiction, its status as a verbal representation. A diarist sitting and writing alone by a desk inevitably calls attention to writing (as action) itself" (Keskinen 1998: 195).

“a hero and heroine” who are finally able to escape to love and re-discovery of each other, but this plan is never fully carried out: “I had never stated it so baldly before, and as I put the novel down, the story seemed absurd and I was abysmally dejected. [...] New ideas were forming on the novel, confused and often destructive” (BS 59). As Frank McConnell suggests, the plot of Lovett’s fictitious novel is exactly the plot of his own experience in the story-world of the actual novel, with the important (and ironic) difference that in reality his “escape” from society will not result in romance (see 1977: 85). It is as if in this time of inhuman totalitarian systems there is no possibility even to write a romantic thriller with a happy ending; in this sense *Barbary Shore* is intertextually connected with the contemporary literary scene including such modernist works as Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which also depicts a failed love story inside a totalitarian system. Mailer’s reflection upon his problems of fiction-making can be seen in the author’s own criticism of *Barbary Shore* and “his self-advertised obsession with the materials of *The Deer Park*, particularly the character of Sergius, which suggests the situation of a writer who is involved with materials that refuse to fulfill their ultimate promise” (Wenke 1987: 12). In a short story published between these two novels, “The Man Who Studied Yoga” (1952), the impersonal narrative voice criticizes the fictional novelist Sam, and the reader may hear distant echoes of Mailer’s actual writing problems: “Notes here, pages there, it sprawls through a formless wreck of identical ideas and half-episodes, utterly without shape” (AM 167).

In his third novel, *The Deer Park* (1955), Mailer constructs his narrator-protagonist Sergius O’Shaughnessy as a rootless person, even an “artificial” one suggested by his falsely “Irish” surname. As Sergius writes, “[t]here is nothing in the world like being a false Irishman”; he adds: “Of course I have been faking all my life” (DP 23). Obviously, these self-reflections suggest that Sergius is a typical case of an unreliable narrator. On its deepest level, however, *The Deer Park* is a story of the development of a novelist, the very novelist who is able to write the novel we are reading. Sergius, in his life-career from orphan to war-hero, has little except his imagination. In this sense, *The Deer Park* as a whole may be read as a “product of Sergius’s imagination: it represents his coming to terms with himself and the world” (Rollyson 1991: 94). Sergius is a typically Mailerian character who has to create his own identity through his writing and to use his writing as his imaginative route out of the systems of “others,” in this case out of the artificial world of Hollywood glamour and spiritual corruption.

In some parts of the narrative Sergius, self-consciously developing his novelistic imagination takes the stance of an omniscient narrator who is able

to report scenes he could not possibly participate in. This “paraleptic” technique, which replaces the stance of the first-person narrator by that of the seemingly objective and omniscient one, is similar to Fitzgerald’s technique in *The Great Gatsby*. We may recall, for example, the scene where Nick Carraway tells the events after Myrtle Wilson’s death in the car accident, without himself being personally present in that scene. As Phelan suggests, Nick’s narration “is marked by the *presence* of knowledge that he presumably should not (because he could not) have,” and he connects this scenic description with the practice made famous by Tom Wolfe, so that “Nick is a New Journalist *avant la lettre* as he not only gives a verbatim report of a conversation he did not overhear but also includes numerous small dramatic details” (1996: 106-107).⁷ This kind of character-narrator is not supposed, in fiction, to strictly keep to his or her own viewpoint and knowledge, because ultimately “he” or “she” is a linguistically constructed channel of imagination, rhetoric, and a specific world-view, and “the reader will grant a license to a fictional homodiegetic narrator” (Lehman 1997: 49). Instead of seeing Nick’s practice simply or only as a sign of unreliability, then, Phelan points out that Nick performs a wide range of narratorial functions, not so much violating as foregrounding the possibilities of the mimetic conventions of narrative. Ultimately Nick functions as the mask through which Fitzgerald filters his narrative art and “convey[s] his authorial vision” (1996: 118). *The Deer Park* is Mailer’s self-conscious rewriting of *The Great Gatsby*, opening with an allusion to the beginning of Fitzgerald’s novel. In Mailer’s novel, the ambiguously luminous figure of film director Charles Eitel is cre-

⁷ Lehman refers to this discussion by Phelan in order to illuminate the different problems in fiction and nonfiction as regards their “rhetorical work.” Phelan holds that a fictional character-narrator can be rhetorically effective and even convincing even when (and perhaps even because) that narrator violates narrow mimetic logic, and the reader will grant a certain license to imagination, agreeing to “a set of conventions for representing what we provisionally and temporarily agree to be real” (1996: 110). This view of narrative omnipotence raises two important issues for Lehman when applied to the reading of *nonfiction*: “(1) In a sense, all nonfiction narrators are homodiegetic in that their access to characters and information has to be negotiated within the boundaries of previously occurring events, thus making them characters (even if unnamed) in the stories they tell. (2) The reader should be more aware, and perhaps less forgiving, of mimetic lapses, such as when the narrator tells more than he can know (paralepsis), if these lapses are found in nonfiction. [...] A signal difference between nonfiction and most forms of fiction is that the narrator assumes a tangible presence that is circumscribed by the possibilities and limitations of an actual human being” (1997: 50). Lehman’s analysis of the rhetorical and readerly problems of nonfiction foregrounds the difference between fiction and nonfiction. In comparison, what Phelan’s reading of *The Great Gatsby* (or my reading of *The Deer Park*) is meant to suggest is that when we know the conventions of reading *fiction*, we may grant much freedom and flexibility to the author’s and his narrator’s ways of representing the narrative world.

ated and filtered through the young narrator-protagonist's presentation very much in the same manner as Nick sees Gatsby.⁸

The Deer Park is, among Mailer's novels, one that most clearly illuminates the questions of Mailer's poetics of nonfiction. Mailer's own aesthetic creed is presented through Sergius's words: "Quite a few times I have thought that a newspaperman is obsessed with finding the facts in order to tell a lie, and a novelist is a galley-slave to his imagination so he can look for the truth" (DP 88). As Wenke suggests, Sergius's narrative position partly corresponds to the author-narrator of Mailer's subsequent nonfiction: "[S]ergius relates Eitel's story for the most part from the standpoint of an absentee narrator who uses his novelistic imagination, like later Mailer, to discover the truth when facts are unavailable or inconclusive" (1987: 58; cf. Gindin 1986: 559). In his approach to Eitel and other characters in *Desert D'Or*, the imaginary area surrounding Hollywood, Sergius is a self-reflexive novelist pondering his problems of writing and finding the right way to convey the "style" of his characters. (We may note that Eitel – read "I tell" – constantly feeds the young writer's imagination with his fascinating life story.) Sergius even admits that at least part of his repre-

⁸ This allusion was probably first suggested by Barry Leeds (1969: 109). According to Frank McConnell, Eitel, like Gatsby, becomes more interesting than the somewhat colorless narrator-reporter, who finally finds his own style and imagination by using the other man as his ideal model (see 1977: 91). As Richard Godden maintains, Mailer "is forever re-writing Fitzgerald" (1990: 195). Compare also Michael Glenday's reading of *The Deer Park*: "The first chapter, though noticeably informed by the narrative rhythms of Scott Fitzgerald, a debt Mailer later fully acknowledged, is one of the most memorable in his fiction" (1995: 72). There are, then, overt echos of *The Great Gatsby* in the opening of *The Deer Park*: "In the cactus wild of Southern California, a distance of two hundred miles from the capital of cinema as I choose to call it, is the town of Desert D'Or. There I went from the Air Force to look for a good time. Some time ago" (DP 1); "I enjoyed the counter-raid so thoroughly that I came back restless. Instead of being the warm center of the world, the Middle West now seemed like the ragged edge of the universe – so I decided to go East and learn the bond business" (Fitzgerald 1950 [1926]: 9). Of course, both beginnings allude to the classic beginning in American literature, "Ishmael's" opening in *Moby-Dick*: "Some years ago – never mind how long precisely – having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world" (Melville 1951 [1851]: 7). As Mailer explicitly states in *Advertisements for Myself*, he had several problems with Sergius's narrative style, and "to allow him to write in a style which at its best sounded like Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* must of course blur his character and leave the book unreal" (AM 235). In the same context, Mailer ponders his problems with different narrative styles and voices: "I had become mired in a false style for every narrator I tried"; "I seemed to be unable to create a narrator in the first person who was not overdiligent, oversensitive, and painfully tender" (AM 237). What makes the style of *The Deer Park* problematic, and somewhat forced, is perhaps due to Mailer's inability to decide whether to write in the "soft" style of Fitzgerald or in the "hard" style of Hemingway (see also Schwenger 1984: 25).

sentation of this world and its people is based on the active use of imagination: “[I]magination becomes a vice if we do not exercise it” (DP 88). By abandoning the coldness and superficiality of daily journalism in his literary nonfiction, Mailer (like his fictional spokesman Sergius) proceeds toward the narrative and figurative possibilities provided by novelistic style and imagination, and (like Sergius) he uses the events and characters mainly as the raw material out of which literary form and meaning is produced.

The last chapters of *The Deer Park* are almost entirely devoted to Sergius's “education” as a future novelist who is eventually able to produce his own book. In a typically Mailerian way, the story of becoming a novelist is also a story of hard work, even suffering, on a biographical level quite closely reflecting Mailer's own experiences as a developing writer.⁹ As the work of writing has an existential, even ontological significance in Mailer's thematics, we may see how Sergius relates his writing problems to his own problems of identity and self-respect. The sense of “failure” is closely connected to Mailer's vision of artistic production, but a new kind of success may be born out of this aesthetic and physical experience of failure (see my analysis of *Of a Fire on the Moon* in Chapter IV). This is exactly Sergius's problem and his source of development as well: “So I continued to write, and as I worked, I learned the taste of a failure over and over again, for the longest individual journey may well be the path from the first creative enthusiasm to *the concluded artifact*” (DP 300; my emphasis). Soon after this pondering upon both “failure” and “the concluded artifact,” and their inevitably reciprocal relationship in the process of literary production, Sergius gives the reader a hint about how his emerging novelistic imagination works. This occurs in the abrupt move between chapters 27 and 28, from the reflection on literary imagination to its product, the newly created fictional world: “[A]t times my imagination would take me to all the corners I would never visit again, and their life became more real to me than anything of my own, and I would see them on the round of their days... / *Chapter Twenty-Eight* / ...Eitel on a particular night, a period after he returned to the capital” (DP 303-304). On the last pages of *The Deer Park* Sergius writes his fictitious “Deer Park,” this time transforming the “real” people of his recent past for the imaginative purposes of his novel-in-progress.

⁹ The large embedded narrative in *Advertisements for Myself* concerns itself with “Biography of Style.” One of the articles in the collection documents Mailer's painful experiences of literary production in his struggle with different versions and drafts of *The Deer Park*. The novel was first rejected by a host of publishers, eventually, after publication, appearing as somewhere between “half-success and small failure” (AM 247).

Perhaps the most peculiar case among Mailer's "fictional" narrator-protagonists is the one who does not originate in his own imagination, Jesus Christ in *The Gospel According to the Son* (1997). As the title of the novel implies, this is the one true gospel, written by the protagonist of the canonical Gospels of the New Testament. Already at the beginning of the narrative, Jesus makes his writing position visible, and, as it becomes clearer by the end of the story, he is writing his version "now," in some heavenly room of his own:

While I would not say that Mark's gospel is false, it has much exaggeration. And I would offer less for Matthew, and for Luke and John, who gave me words I never uttered and described me as gentle when I was pale with rage. Their words were written many years after I was gone and only repeat what old men told them. Very old men. Such tales are to be leaned upon no more than a bush that tears tree from its roots and blows about in the wind. (GAS 3-4)

Jesus's own version of the gospel takes a strongly critical and polemical stance towards the canonical Gospels: "Luke was not a Jew. So his account is rank with exaggeration; he hated Jews" (GAS 64); "Later, this story was much exaggerated by Mark and Matthew and Luke. [...] Exaggeration is the language of the Devil" (GAS 116-117). Somewhat ironically, as Frank Kermode puts it from a historical perspective, "it was important to the survival of the new religion that the evangelists' reports should be taken as true, against rival accounts," so that "they used all means to assert their truth; John's metanarrative voice is one such device, the provision of verisimilar detail is another" (1979: 109).¹⁰ We may see how Mailer's Jesus problematizes the representations given of him and the very language of these representations. His own style (actually coming close to Mark's realism) aims at being clear, simplified, and dignified, whereas the Devil he meets in the desert believes in stylistic exaggeration and colorful rhetoric where words are separated from meanings and actions.

What Mailer's Jesus deems valuable, then, is the language of truth as opposed to the Devil's language of lies and deception:

So I will give my own account. For those who would ask how my words have come to this page, I would tell them to look upon it as a small miracle. (My gospel, after all, will speak of miracles.) Yet I would hope to remain closer to the truth. [...] It is also true that whether four gospels had been favored or forty, no number would suffice. For where the truth is with us in one place, it is buried in another. What is for me to tell remains neither a simple story nor without surprise, but it is true, at least to all that I recall. (GAS 4)

¹⁰ Compare also Kermode's review of *The Gospel According to the Son* in *The New York Review of Books* 44:8 (1997), 1-4.

In his own narration, Mailer's Jesus tries to go beyond those invented tales and false representations that have filled the world after his death and resurrection. In a sense, then, his own gospel is also a gospel of a clean *language* which could possibly reach the truth better than the languages of the evil.¹¹ As has often been suggested, the actual Gospels, especially Mark's, also try to communicate an often mysterious and ambiguous story using as simple and plain a style as possible. Whereas Mailer's Jesus tries to give his own, possibly more truthful account of the events canonized by the Gospels, the novelist's main intention in the writing of *his* fictional gospel is based on his attempt to fill in the gaps of the canonical Gospels which contained some sayings that were "worthy of Shakespeare" but that were, on the whole, "poorly written" (see SA 87; cf. O'Hagan & Camp 1997: 11; Dearborn 1999: 419). Still, the narrative style of Mailer – or that of his fictional narrator-protagonist Jesus – is rather close to the style of the actual gospels, deriving from it and slightly modifying it for the purposes of a novelistic narrative. There is, of course, some irony in that Mailer's novel is a work of fiction and that accordingly his narrator-protagonist's gospel is fiction inside fiction (while Mailer's fictional Jesus claims to be telling the truth) – whereas it would be an altogether different matter to suggest that the actual canonical Gospels are fictional texts.¹²

A Mailerian Theme: The Ontological Meaning of Writing

In some sense almost all Mailer's narratives, fictions and nonfictions alike, are self-reflexive "detective" stories that bring together some mysterious event and the writing about that event. John Hellmann refers to the metanarrative construction in Mailer's nonfiction:

[I]n Book II of *The Executioner's Song* Mailer creates a mounting mystery of how the events of Book I finally came into the hands of the author. (He takes the reader

¹¹ In connection with this theme, Mailer's novel also "reproduces" the well-known confrontation between the silently confident Jesus and the intelligent word-player Pilate: "In one way only I am a king. I can bear witness to the truth." [...] Pilate said: 'What is truth?' *He might be without belief, but he was not without tongue.* He said, 'Where there is truth, there will be no peace. Where peace abides, you will find no truth'" (GAS 219; my emphasis). Compare Terry Eagleton's view: "The more conservative forms of postmodernism represent the ideology of those who believe that, if the system is to survive, truth must be sacrificed to practice, [...]. Perhaps in this respect Pontius Pilate was the first postmodernist" (1996: 40-41).

¹² As John Searle argues on a semantic and pragmatic basis, "the Bible as literature" indicates a theologically neutral attitude, but "the Bible as fiction" is tendentious" (1979 [1975]: 59). Compare also Sternberg (1985: 23-29).

to the solution without actually naming it.) Indeed, in Part II of *Of a Fire on the Moon* Mailer creates suspense by making his attempt to construct a meaningful account of the moon flight the dramatic focus of the narrative (1981: 32).

Arguably the most “popular” and the least ambitious of Mailer’s novels, *Tough Guys Don’t Dance* (1984), constructs a classical detective mystery as a reflection of literary production. A detective story may represent both an epistemological and metafictional mode, comprising self-conscious fictions which “revolve around problems of the accessibility and circulation of knowledge, the individual mind’s grappling with an elusive or occluded reality” (McHale 1992: 147). In this sense, “like metafiction, [detective fiction] foregrounds the questions of identity” (Waugh 1996 [1984]: 82). As Peter Rabinowitz puts it, “the pleasure of the text in detective stories resides primarily in the reader’s *inability* to figure out what happened until told” (1987: 150). In self-conscious cases like Mailer’s *Tough Guys* the narrator-protagonist (a typically amnesiac Mailerian character) is equally incapable of finding out what happened *until told*, which means that the narrator has to write his story down in order to make it comprehensible. The crime mystery itself is, however, mostly focalized through the amnesiac and chaotic mind of the protagonist in the middle of the events, and thus his knowledge is perhaps on an even weaker level than that of the reader (who, of course, knows at least *how to read* mystery stories).

In the classical detective mode, represented for example by Conan Doyle, the “first-level story” or crime story “is often told by a friend of the detective, who explicitly acknowledges that he is writing a book; the second story consists, in fact, in explaining how this very book came to be written” (Todorov 1977 [1971]: 45). In postmodernist innovations in the detective form, the epistemological question of solving the mystery is often connected with ontological problems, such as those concerning the writer-detective’s relation to the world which may remain mysterious. Writers like Paul Auster (in *The New York Trilogy*, obviously, but also in novels like *Leviathan* [1992]) or E.L. Doctorow (e.g., *The Waterworks* [1994]) construct self-reflexive narratives where the solving of the crime and the writing of the book go hand in hand, proceeding simultaneously and giving an illusion that one is not to be found without the other. Note, for instance, the narrator’s closing comments in *Leviathan*: “The book is over now because the case is over. If I put in this final page, it is only to record how they found the answer, to note the last little surprise, the ultimate twist that concludes the story” (Auster 1992: 243). While the actual crime may remain ultimately a mystery, it is through *writing* that Auster’s or Doctorow’s novelist-journalist-narrators try to make sense of the world. In a (post)modernist, self-conscious detective

story there is potentially no exact solution or clear closure, and this reflects both the “openness” of the world and the text itself, drawing the reader into the textual production as the explanation of the mystery and the interpretation of the text blend into one.¹³

The narrator-protagonist of *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, the would-be novelist Tim Madden, tries to remember whether he has killed his wife or not. Already at the beginning of his narrative we get a glimpse of the narrator-protagonist who cannot tell things apart and emerges as quite unreliable, as if living in the middle of blurred, obscure images and small fragments of memory:

I can only say that my memory would be clear to me in the morning, but shattered, that is to say, in pieces. Each fragment was sharp enough, yet like puzzles that have been thrown together, not all the pieces seemed to come out of the same box. Which is equal, I suppose, to saying my dreams were now as reasonable as my memory, or my memory was as untrustworthy as my dreams. In either event, *I could not tell them apart.* (TGDD 24-25; my emphasis)

Here the fragments of memory are like “puzzles” and “pieces” in a mysterious murder story, and the impossibility of distinguishing between dreams and memory draws the reader into the fictional world presented to us by an amnesiac, unreliable narrative subjectivity. The reader must take part, from the very beginning, in the complex game of interpretation, and thus Mailer's self-conscious detective pastiche uses the classic *mise en abyme* constructions we can find earlier in Poe, precursor of the genre “in which the reader would be asked to interpret the author's intentions by participating in the detective's attempt to interpret the criminal's” (Irwin 1994: 414). The story of *Tough Guys* is set in the foggy and ghostly atmosphere of Provincetown, Massachusetts, surrounded by “a cold sea air filled with the bottomless chill that lies at the cloistered heart of ghost stories” (TGDD 6).¹⁴ The scene itself seems to provide sources for Madden's literary imagi-

¹³ As John Irwin suggests, the traditional “solution to the mystery” is transformed into “the mystery to a solution”: “In any detective story whose central mystery is the self-conscious description of its own workings, there will always be one more step needed, precisely because self-consciousness by its very nature can never really think its own ending, its own absence” (1994: 423).

¹⁴ Provincetown is Mailer's hometown, which figures through similar imagery on the last pages of *Of a Fire on the Moon*. In fact, in the last part of his moon book Mailer discusses his plans for writing a chilling murder mystery set amid this very scenery: “[L]ike many novelists Aquarius had a few stray powers of divination, and had projected a novel two years before [the Manson murders] about a gang of illumined and drug-accelerated American guerrillas who lived in the wilds of a dune or a range and descended on Provincetown to kill. A year later, parts of four girls had been found in a

nation, and, as readers, we can never be altogether sure where his real experiences end and his imaginative creations begin. In addition to his amnesia, Madden is often drunk, finding some pleasure as “these alcoholic squiggles metamorphosed into a legible text” (TGDD 11). As Madden needs to find solutions, or at least possible answers, to his own whereabouts in the obscure murder night, he constructs various scenarios, still reflecting that “yet none of these scenarios, nor very little of them, can be true” (TGDD 23). Some of his self-reflexive questions are directed not only to himself but to his reader-audience as well: “Yes, but how much of this had actually happened? It was obvious to me that I could conceive of conversations as easily as I could live them. Was I not a writer, after all?” (TGDD 26). Here Madden comes close to Sergius in *The Deer Park*, a self-conscious novelist showing traits of omniscience in his creation of scenes he could not possibly have witnessed.

The creation of one’s own story-world has, as suggested above, a certain existential meaning as well, for the narrator may feel alive only through writing and through his attempts at making *his* world coherent. Self-conscious detective stories often suggest that “at most, we *make* truth discursively and rhetorically by telling stories and negotiating among them” and thus “the search is not for some empirically verifiable ‘truth’ but rather some coherent story ‘about’ the world” (Rabinowitz 1994a: 159-60). In *Tough Guys* Madden’s somewhat hopeless fantasy about his own coherent identity may ultimately produce a coherent work of fiction. As the narrative proceeds, we may notice that the deepest problem for Madden (the problem that really maddens him) is not the murder of his wife Patty Lareine, nor a bunch of other headless corpses in the dark Truro woods, but his own fragmented masculine identity which can only be put together by writing fiction and by reading one’s own fiction: “If you are no longer one man, *only a collection of fragments*, each with its own manner, the act of looking back on *writing* done when one was *full of identity* (even phony identity) can *put you together* for a little while, and did while I was *rereading these pages*” (TGDD 91-92; my emphases). In the end, the rather trivial murder mystery may be solved, but there seems to be no clear closure to Madden’s problems of identity, which also means that the writing has to continue: “And I? Well,

common grave in Truro eight miles away. They would bring to trial a young man from the town who was steeped by report in no modest depths of witchcraft” (FM 460-61). In a reciprocal way, *Tough Guys* includes an allusion to *Fire*, in which Mailer-Aquarius contemplates Cézanne’s art, as Tim Madden now reflects: “Somebody once wrote that Cézanne shifted our perception of magnitude until a white towel on a table was like the blue-shadowed snows in the ravines of a mountain, and the treatment of patch skin became a desert valley. An interesting idea” (TGDD 92; see FM 300-01).

I am so compromised by so many acts that I must try to write my way out of the internal prison of my nerves, my guilts and my deep-rooted spiritual debts" (TGDD 228).

This theme – a man's attempt to construct his identity through his own more or less fictional writing – is one of the typical, even pervasive concerns in Mailer's fiction from *Barbary Shore* to *The Gospel According to the Son*. The most extensive realization of this theme occurs in *Harlot's Ghost* (1991) in which the narrator-protagonist Harry Hubbard reads his own thousand-page story of his life in the service of the CIA on microfilm, feeling alive only when reliving these scenes of the past: "I felt as near and as removed from my original pages as if I were looking at old photographs attaching me imperfectly to the past" (HG 90). There is, then, a clear continuity between *Tough Guys* and the novel following it, the far more ambitious *Harlot's Ghost*, which also means a transformation of the conventions of the detective story and the problems of subjective identity into the realm of spy literature and the history of Cold War politics. Brian McHale suggests that contemporary fictions by Pynchon, DeLillo and others "illustrate in various ways the 'cross-over' of thriller motifs from entertainment literature to 'advanced' postmodernist fiction, and the more or less self-conscious use of such motifs as tools of cognitive mapping" (1992: 178). In Patricia Waugh's words, "the thriller is another form that provides a basis for [such] metafictional writing," being "much closer [than detective fiction] to what appears to be the experience of living in the contemporary world" (1996 [1984]: 84). Like Madden, who writes his own detective fiction for his own psychological purposes, Hubbard suggests that this is not actually "a spy novel" and it "is not to be read as a memoir"; "it is rather a *Bildungsroman*, an extended narrative of a young man's education and development" (HG 91). Though *Harlot's Ghost* – or, more exactly, Hubbard's own fictitious novel inside Mailer's actual novel – does not satisfy the readers of popular fiction, it may turn out instead to be a parody of the classic *Bildungsroman* which, in fact, "has been a most obvious and popular parodic model" (Hutcheon 1989: 19). Therefore we may read the narrator's generic instructions ironically. Harry Hubbard's "education" and "development" result not in the classical, peaceful reconciliation of the self and society but in the paranoid and skeptical vision of the world of the CIA, a world governed by evil powers, absurd plots, and distorted facts.¹⁵

¹⁵ The title of *Harlot's Ghost* alludes to Balzac's novel *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*, translated into English as "A Harlot High and Low." In his essay with the same (English) name, written in 1976, Mailer makes the connection between Balzac's prostitutes and CIA agents, for "the harlot, after all, inhabited the world of *as if*," play-

Nevertheless, Harry tries to make this world coherent and meaningful for himself through writing and reading his microfilm, his only link to past reality. This text, entitled “Alfa,” consists of “two thousand frames of microfilm” dealing with Harry’s CIA career from 1955 to 1963, and is itself *framed* by a shorter narrative “Omega” written as a paper manuscript, “a moderate one hundred and eighty pages” about his recent experiences between 1983-1984 (see HG 6-7). While Harry’s own narrative is divided into “Alpha” and “Omega,” it seems that the novel proposes “to use Alpha/Omega to explain nearly everything” (Glenday 1995: 142; cf. Dearborn 1999: 413-14). On the embedded level, Harry’s great love, Kittredge, the wife of the mysterious CIA principal “Harlot” Montague (and the future wife of Harry), constructs her private philosophy of the world based upon the dualism between Alpha and Omega, representing conflicting aspects of the human psyche as separate personalities living in a single person. As John Whalen-Bridge notes, the structural relationship between Harry’s Alpha and Omega manuscripts reflects Kittredge’s thesis: “These manuscripts are also stylistically distinct [“Omega” being a Gothic thriller and “Alpha” an encyclopedic narrative], and Mailer uses style to orchestrate the larger movements in his obsessively dualistic novel” (1998: 114, 116). *Harlot’s Ghost* might be read as a self-reflexive novel which contains conflicting narrative structures or conflicting separate parts, but the over-all text seems to lack the creative dialectical tension that is the core of Kittredge’s Alpha/Omega philosophy.

On one level, Alpha and Omega are, as Kittredge explains it, “incredibly different,” but they still need to communicate with each other, and if they “can manage all the same to express their separate needs and perceptions to each other, then you have an extraordinary person” (HG 149). We could add that in the ideal case we could have an extraordinary novel here, but according to some critics, *Harlot’s Ghost* ultimately lacks “the artifice that would have made it meaningful” (Glenday 1995: 138). Mailer’s ambitious mega-

ing a “mysterious role” and in a sense “living under cover” (PAP 159). Constructing his thesis upon this “new metaphor,” Mailer envisions that “the CIA occupies a region in the modern mind where every truth is obliged to live in its denial; facts are wiped out by artifacts; proof enters the logic of counterproof and we are in the dream; matter breathes next to antimatter” (PAP 160). “A Harlot High and Low” is actually one of Mailer’s most ‘scientific’ studies on historiography and “factology” (including notes and bibliography), and here he constructs his six-part “Epistemological Model” (PAP 178). The world of the CIA, which is connected with the mysterious events of contemporary America (from the Kennedy assassination to the Watergate affair, the latter being Mailer’s main focus here) leads Mailer to contemplate that “study of the CIA may not lead to the exposure of facts so much as to the epistemology of facts” (PAP 178). Indeed, the world of the CIA reveals that there are multiple “facts”: “Let us go back to the facts, to the false facts, distorted facts, concealed facts, empty facts, secretly rich facts, and unverifiable speculations of our narrative” (PAP 179).

novel, may, despite its complex framing device, be only a partial aesthetic achievement, owing, perhaps, to his inability to find a form for his fiction (see Tabbi 1995: 63). Still, there is a certain formal complexity to *Harlot's Ghost* that cannot be explained in terms of traditional aesthetic criteria. As Jerry Schuchalter suggests, "*Harlot's Ghost* may be many novels cohabiting the same book or a curious hybrid of novelistic forms or even a collection of texts redolent of different authors and different historical time periods" (1993: 60). Among the literary genres that can be found inside this large "trans-novel," would be a *Bildungsroman* and a spy novel (referred to by the narrator himself), a Jewish-American family novel, a political novel, a documentary novel, a Gothic romance, and a modern version of the epistolary novel (since large sections of Harry's development in the service of the CIA are represented through an extensive correspondence between Harry and Kittredge, as these two start as pen pals and end as lovers). Finally, the formal complexity of *Harlot's Ghost* is achieved through the framing device which embeds all these possible novels in Harry's massive microfilm.

When reading his life story on microfilm, Harry feels as if he has "stepped through the looking glass"; subsequently the microfilm becomes more real to him than his life. Harry's own writing becomes *ontologically* important, being the last connection to his past self: "I clung to my writings as they were body organs" (HG 85) and "as I projected the microfilm, I would sometimes whisper the words aloud" (HG 89). *Harlot's Ghost* exemplifies, perhaps more clearly than any other of Mailer's texts, Linda Hutcheon's concept of 'historiographic metafiction' which asks *both* epistemological and ontological questions: "How do we know the past (or present)? What is the ontological status of that past? Of its documents? Of our narratives?" (1988: 50). At the end of the extremely long narrative, which has followed the complex events of Cold-War America through the eyes and experience of Harry Hubbard's younger self, the narrator again foregrounds his actual present position in a grim motel apartment in Moscow. Escaping his possible enemies, he still reads the microfilm, which, after all, is the narrative text the reader has been reading all along:

Memories wheeled about me like matter from an eruption in space. Such memories would return to me again as soon as I had no more to read. I was grateful then for each envelope of microfilm still unprojected. [...] Yes, I was alone, and I was in Moscow, and I was all right so long as I kept to the narrative. It would move, frame by frame, on the old white plaster wall of this old hulk of a motel. (HG 839-840)

As implied here, the narrator may exist only as long as his narrative continues, so that "I was grateful then for each envelope of microfilm still

unprojected” and “I was all right so long as I kept to the narrative.” People of course have various reasons for telling stories, and sometimes the reasons for telling are more crucial than the story itself. The classic example, where the continuing story-telling means the continuation of one’s life, is of course that of Scheherazade of *The Thousand and One Nights*. Interestingly, Mailer’s Egyptian epic *Ancient Evenings* (1983) employs a similar narrative framework, as the embedded narrator-protagonist, Menenhetet the First, is obliged to tell a chain of stories to the Pharaoh on the “Night of the Pig” in order to save his own life.¹⁶ As he addresses his distinguished narratee, “‘I can speak,’ [...] in four voices. [...] Now, if You desire, I can speak as I am here, *Your* Menenhetet, a nobleman, a General, and later a doctor of renown” (AE 213). Happily, like Scheherazade, Menenhetet has stories to tell, due to the fact that he has lived many lives (because of reincarnation) and obviously because of his extended imagination based on Egyptian mythology, including his exceptionally obscene rendering of the myth of Osiris. Still, it is his obscenity and daring in front of the Pharaoh that eventually costs him his life. In a sense, Menenhetet, an imaginative and mythical character, repeats Mailerian creeds concerning the complexities of the relationship between fictional and factual storytelling. This becomes visible in Menenhetet’s problematization of the representations of the historical battle of Kadesh in which he was a privileged witness-participant (not unlike Mailer himself in the middle of the battle of the Pentagon in *The Armies of the Night*): “‘I could tell you,’ said Menenhetet to our Pharaoh, and to my mother and father, ‘of how we spoke of this battle later, when each man could tell it to his own advantage. Then, it was only by comparing the lies that you could begin to look for the truth’” (AE 338).

In a style similar to that of Scheherazade and Menenhetet, Harry Hubbard in *Harlot’s Ghost* is also able to give reasons for the extreme length of his narrative, for his life seems to depend on it, although the danger and threat he feels is mostly based on paranoia (since he is himself the only audience to his narrative). In fact, at the end of the framing “Omega” narrative Harry reflects on the very extensiveness of his embedded “Alfa” text: “Perhaps I

¹⁶ Harold Bloom has noted the connection: “Unlike Scheherazade, [Menenhetet] finally runs out of stories” (1986 [1983]: 197). The case of Sheherazade is obviously one of the favorite examples in narratological studies of the relationship between the narrator and the narratee: “It is evident that the heroine’s fate and that of the narration depend not only upon her capabilities as a storyteller, but also upon the humor of the narratee. If the caliph should become tired and stop listening, Scheherazade will die and the narrative will end.” (Prince 1980 [1973]: 8); “Here, quite graphically, life has been equated with discourse, death with the end of discourse and silence” (McHale 1987: 228); “Scheherazade believes that she will be killed if she stops narrating. But this is to say only that Sheherazade has a motive for narrating, and this holds true for all narrators” (Nelles 1997: 130).

was captured by Thomas Mann's dictum that 'Only the exhaustive is truly interesting'" (HG 91). A similar kind of creed – or an argument for the exhaustiveness of the narrative – is given in *Oswald's Tale*, this time through the voice of a real-life person, Oswald's mother Marguerite (see Chapter VI). Apparently, in both cases the length of the actual narrative is defended, as it were, by Mailer's using his narrator (Harry Hubbard) or embedded narrator (Marguerite Oswald) as a kind of soft filter, but the aesthetic problem may still remain. Genette, for example, discusses the different levels of temporality when it comes to the length of the *fictive* and the *actual* book (as in Proust's case): "Writing the fictive book, which is the subject of the narrative, is, like writing every book, a 'task [that] was long'. But the actual book, the narrative-book, does not have knowledge of its own 'length': it does away with its own duration" (1980 [1972]: 224). Finally, however, even *Harlot's Ghost* finds its closure; then again, it does not. After having read all his microfilm, Hubbard is ready to move to the new, unknown world: "Unlike God, I had not been able to present all my creation. I was out of the documents and on my own, and my life was more exposed than it had ever been, for I was taking the longest leap of my life" (HG 1098). Still, the last words of the narrative sound ambiguous, because they may belong either to the narrator or to the author promising more text (that is, another book or a sequel), or they may reflect the Mailerian theme of the narrative, the sense of life and identity that is never fully closed: "TO BE CONTINUED" (HG 1098).¹⁷

In this section, I have outlined the prevailing narrative and thematic questions in Mailer's fiction, focusing especially on the theme of *writing*. As noted above, Mailer's nonfictional poetics in many ways derives from the ideas, such as those discussed above, first voiced in his fiction. On the other hand, as the next section aims to show, Mailer's early nonfiction has also exerted an influence on his subsequent major work, both fiction and nonfiction.

¹⁷ As Whalen-Bridge comments, "this is a shocking way to end the novel," for "the reader confronts a formal uncertainty," and by ending this way, "the novel denies us all the assurance provided by the insider formulas and neat conclusions of spy thrillers" (1998: 118-119). On the other hand, from the practical viewpoint of reading, it is, indeed, a shocking way to end a novel with more than *one thousand* pages.

Journalistic Conventions, Political Conventions

Essays and Reportage: The Forming of One's Self and Style

In retrospect, Mailer's first collection of miscellaneous writings, *Advertisements for Myself*, appears to be one of his most important works. Mailer's notorious public and writing self, which takes many forms and is constructed through many styles, is the starting point in *Advertisements*. The collection also marks a new beginning in Mailer's art, namely combining an autobiographical persona with a new literary style. As Robert Lucid suggests when speaking of Mailer's first three miscellanies, *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), *The Presidential Papers* (1963), and *Cannibals and Christians* (1966), "the Norman Mailers of these three volumes of collected pieces are, of course, personae, created versions of a public artistic personality" (1971: 9). After the public figure of Norman Mailer is created in these self-consciously complex and fragmented collections, we may note Mailer repeating (rather than developing) this practice in his subsequent miscellanies *Existential Errands* (1972) and *Pieces and Pontifications* (1982), culminating in *The Time of Our Time* (1998), an anthology of the writer's *oeuvre* and a collection of the most recent pieces.

Richard Foster maintains that Mailer's first three miscellanies are works "principally about their author" and that their themes are related to those of the author's first three novels, concerning "the complex and difficult action of 'slouching off' the 'old consciousness'" (1968: 22). As Morris Dickstein suggests, "already in *The Deer Park*, Mailer seemed at odds with fiction as a literary medium," and thus "Mailer's next book [*Advertisements*] would not be a novel but a collage assembled out of the blockage of his career as a novelist" (2002: 151). In Joseph Tabbi's words, Mailer's work is marked by a ceaseless supersession of his own earlier accomplishments, and the constructed self is forever divided against itself in the ongoing attempt to exceed the limitations of its earlier versions. Thus "much of Mailer's celebrity performance is the spectacle of a personality constantly forming and reforming itself" (1995: 19, 36). *Advertisements for Myself* is, obviously, the breakthrough of a "new" Mailer, who, after searching for his "right" voice and style, now presents himself anew; in this respect, the book is Mailer's "literary manifesto" (Adams 1976: 3). According to some other viewpoints,

Advertisements “represents the invention, [...] of a new form” (Foster 1968: 26); “the very form of the book is a commentary on the impossibility of squeezing American experience into a fictive novel” (Zavarzadeh 1976: 158); the book is “a form of autobiography which tells the story of a writer and his struggle with available forms” (Radford 1983: 227); and in *Advertisements* Mailer is said to have “turned self-quotation into a literary form” (Godden 1990: 203).¹⁸

Advertisements for Myself contains seemingly autobiographical materials without becoming a traditional autobiography. Even though Mailer often appears here as an “I,” he also remains an object to be studied, so that *Advertisements* is also “a biography of the *writer*,” and “an illustrated chronicle of the writer’s search for his true role as an artist” (Merrill 1992: 87). Joyce Carol Oates, for example, deals with Mailer’s specific way of using autobiographical form as an aesthetic principle, arguing that Mailer’s art is an autobiographical dramatizing of his inner war (see 1976: 303n). More than a history or a biography of the fully realized writer and artist, Mailer’s first collection of writings is a contour of the novelist-journalist who is about to emerge. What makes this suggestion, and self-reflexive experiment, successful is the fact that some of the texts included represent and realize a new style and idea in Mailer’s writing, both fictional (e.g., the short story “The Time of Her Time”) and nonfictional (e.g., the essay “The White Negro”). The book aims to present the “Biography of a Style” (AM 15), a *textual* story of one writer’s education and development. It opens with “A Note to the Reader” informing us that “all short stories, short novels, poems, advertisements, articles, essays, journalism, and miscellany are posted in *their formal category*” (AM 7; my emphasis). At the same time as Mailer announces the very complexity of textual types and variety of materials in his book, he seems to be ironizing on “formal categories,” for in the

¹⁸ The book can, in the process of reading, be constructed as a personal and autobiographical narrative, being modeled on Fitzgerald’s “The Crack-Up,” just as *The Deer Park* was partly modeled on *The Great Gatsby*. *Advertisements* is therefore a book about “early success, subsequent failure and demoralization, and the reflexive counterthrust of self-regeneration and re-creation” (Foster 1968: 22). Mailer’s problems seem to reflect those of Fitzgerald; however, in this book, “amid the wreckage of his hopes, [Mailer] found himself as his own flawed but exemplary protagonist” (Dickstein 2002: 152). *Advertisements for Myself* can also be read as a self-conscious (post)modernist rewriting of the canonical poetic text, Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” though not without harsh irony: the (post)modern author can no longer “sing” about himself – he must “advertise” himself (see Lounsberry 1990: 141, 151). In Lounsberry’s analysis, the book is Mailer’s remodeling of Whitman along the lines of Harold Bloom’s “creative misreading”: Mailer creatively “swerves” from Whitman while trying to “complete” his precursor’s work. As Bloom puts it, “if not exactly a ‘Song of Myself,’ nevertheless *Advertisements* remains Mailer at his most Whitmanian, as when he celebrates his novel-in-progress” (1986: 2).

actual book the different kinds of textual modes become more or less mixed and strict genre boundaries are blurred. However, there are two Tables of Contents, and as the second is organized according to formal categories (“to satisfy the specialist” [AM 7]), the first follows the chronological order of original publication of the texts from “Beginnings” through “Middles” to the “Games and Ends.”¹⁹ Mailer gives the reader a kind of freedom to choose how to read the collection, and there is a seemingly “dangerous” (but typically Mailerian) implication that not everything is equally good: “For those who care to skim nothing but the cream of each author, and so miss the pleasure of liking him at his worst, I will take the dangerous step of listing what I believe are the best pieces in this book” (AM 7).²⁰

Mailer begins his collection with “First Advertisement for Myself,” noting that “there was a time when Pirandello could tease a comedy of pain out of six characters in search for an author, but that is only a whiff of purgatory next to the yaws of conscience a writer learns to feel when he sets his mirrors face to face and begins to jiggle his Self for a style which will have some relation to *him*” (AM 17). *Advertisements* is an even more “egoistic” and “narcissistic” piece of writing than Mailer’s later texts, for here the reader actually faces an advertisement, and “is invited to sample Mailer’s previous work and several selections from his next novel” (Merrill 1992: 86). Only if we accept the text’s invitation, that is, the “contract” it tries to build between author and reader, are we likely to respond with some sympathy and understanding to Mailer’s (or “Mailer’s”) games. As John Hartsock notes, Mailer’s “overt or reflexive subjectivity [...] outrageously exposes itself to the reader’s scrutiny” (2000: 201-202), thus also representing a new or at least heightened journalistic practice in its opposition to the writer’s detached objectivity. We may note Mailer’s own relatively early artistic *credo*, formulated on the early pages of *Advertisements for Myself*:

To write about myself is to send my style through a circus of variations and postures, a fireworks of virtuosity designed to achieve... I do not even know what. Leave it that I become an actor, a quick-change artist, as if I believe I can trap the Prince of Truth in the act of switching a style. (AM 18)

¹⁹ Elizabeth Bruss notes that the beginning of *Advertisements* represents “the work of a writer highly conscious of his text,” but there is also a difference between the first two paragraphs: the first presents the visible author (“he,” “the writer,” a “literary fraud”), but the second suppresses all mention of the author and introduces “a method” which is “discursive” (1976: 30; see AM 7). According to Bruss, the change in tone and discourse “is associated with changes in the audience, impersonality arising when Mailer faces not ‘his readers’ but an implacable ‘specialist’” (ibid.: 31).

²⁰ In a way Mailer uses here the self-conscious convention of early novelists like Fielding, whose narrators discuss with the readers what the readers may expect to find in their work. In *Tom Jones*, for example, Fielding “offers the reader a menu by which to

Mailer appears to be a very self-conscious literary artist, whose different public roles are often at least as “artificial” performances as those of his ideal predecessor, Ernest Hemingway. As Mailer puts it in his collection of essays, *The Presidential Papers*, “[t]he first art work in an artist is the shaping of his own personality” (PP 284).

Mailer's actual journalism – his “new,” “artistic” and “literary” journalism – starts with three important pieces of reportage in the early sixties, “Superman Comes to the Supermarket” (1960), “Ten Thousand Words a Minute” (1962), and “In the Red Light” (1964). As Robert Merrill argues, these essays “should allow us to trace the growth of Mailer's unique approach to nonfiction.” However, it is only in the latter piece (about the 1964 Republican convention in San Francisco) that “Mailer's interpretive presence is felt throughout” for the first time, thus creating a basis for his “novelistic” nonfiction (see Merrill 1992: 93, 98). Merrill emphasizes the centrality of the often neglected piece “Ten Thousand Words a Minute” in the Mailer canon, seeing it as the actual breakthrough of Mailer's self-reflexive, both participatory and interpretive reportage in a literary, semi-fictionalized mode. The essay, depicting the weird Liston-Patterson championship fight, shows its self-consciousness already in its title: Mailer is writing about 20,000 words about a two-minute fight – thus, “ten thousand words a minute.”

The essay lays bare Mailer's typical convention of self-theorizing nonfiction, with its critical edge always pointed toward common newspaper reportage. It begins with an ironic remark:

Remember that old joke about three kinds of intelligence: human, animal, and military? Well, if there are three kinds of writers: novelists, poets, and reporters, there is certainly a gulf between the poet and the novelist; quite apart from the kind of living they make, poets invariably seem to be aristocrats, usually spoiled beyond repair; and novelists – even if they make a million, or have large talent – look to have something of the working class about them. [...] Now, of course, I attempted to round the image out and say reporters belong to the middle class. Only I do not know if I can push the metaphor. Taken one by one, it is true that reporters tend to be hardheaded, objective, and unimaginative. Their intelligence is sound but unexceptional and they have the middle-class penchant for collecting tales, stories, legends, accounts of practical jokes, details of negotiation, bits of memoir – all those capsules of fiction which serve the middle class as a substitute for ethics and/or culture. Reporters, like shopkeepers, tend to be worshipful of the fact which wins and so covers over the other facts. (PP 215)²¹

decide whether to partake of the text” (Chatman 1998: 909). These kinds of devices and conventions of classic novelists are used by Mailer in different texts (e.g., “Superman Comes to the Supermarket,” “In the Red Light,” and *The Armies of the Night*).

²¹ Cf. Morris Dickstein: “Mailer shapes his immensely long piece as an attack on journalism, with its ‘excessive respect for power’ and its failure to find the truth amid ‘a veritable factology of detail’” (2002: 155).

Mailer's skepticism about daily journalism derives from his sense that it deadens human perception and imagination in its pre-packaged images and falsely created facts; for him, "writing is of use to the psyche only if the writer discovers something he did not know he knew in the act itself of writing" (PP 219). Mailer's journalism is thus always written against the conventions of traditional, "objective" journalism, which only tries to collect and state the "facts" without an intent to go deeper into the workings of the events or human mind. In this sense, Dan Wakefield's early analysis of Mailer's 'creative' or 'literary' journalism still holds:

This is of course not the style of cold, clipped, just-the-facts-please daily newspaper journalism, and in an effort to categorize it, some observers have referred to that kind of approach as "fictional." This confuses the issue, and I think it is partly a result of the old prejudice that any "good writing" must by definition be "fictional" writing. Yet the label suggests that the reporting done in such a style is not factual, but rather something the reporter made up. This is not the case. Such reporting is "imaginative" not because the author has distorted the facts, but because he has presented them in a full instead of a naked manner, brought out the sights, sounds, and feel surrounding those facts, and connected them by comparison with other facts of history, society, and literature in an artistic manner that does not diminish but gives greater depth and dimension to the facts. (1974 [1966]: 41)

In the foreword to his 1972 collection of essays *Existential Errands* Mailer reflects on his method and ideology, seeing that "the moot desire to have one's immediate say on contemporary matters kept diverting the novelistic impulse into journalism" (EE xi). In Mailer's literary journalism the author's subjectivity emerges from the background to the foreground in the recognition that given a phenomenological world's infinite indeterminacy, the selection of facts and details involves the actions of individual cognition and "shaping consciousness" (see Hartsock 2000: 131). By stating himself that "objective reporting is a myth," Mailer expresses his discovery in those early days of his creative journalism that "the personality of the narrator was probably as important as the event" (SA 187).

The practice of writing both fiction and journalism has been a part of many American writers' careers, especially those writers who have excelled in the realistic mode. In fact, an attempt to apply the techniques of novel-writing to journalism or other nonfiction was not a new practice in American writing of the sixties, as we may find reading works like Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) or writings by other journalist-novelists following Twain, such as Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos. It has been quite rare for Mailer scholars to consider his intertextual links to Hemingway in the field of *journalism*, especially in the sense that Hemingway's practice of reportage might con-

tain some patterns which we find in the later Mailerian nonfiction.²² In some reportages of Hemingway the process of textual *production* is brought to the surface of the text. In cases like these, the author “suddenly introduces himself, the reporter, as a character” and emphasizes the very making of this reportage: “[H]e suddenly, at the very end, decides to tell you how he put the story together” (Wolfe 1973: 127). Here is Phyllis Frus’s short analysis of the self-conscious structure of Hemingway’s reportage “Japanese Earthquake” from *By-Line*:

The last two sentences are an exchange between the reporters over who will write the story that the reader has just read:

“Who’s going to write the story. You or me?” asked the girl reporter.

“I don’t know,” said the reporter.

Hemingway plays with the frame by making his piece the story of getting a story. (Frus 1994: 99)

“I don’t know,” said the reporter” – that is, of course, typical of Hemingway, marking both unwillingness and incompetence to deal with feelings, inner life, and it is quite difficult for the reader to relate emotionally to a story like this. Obviously, for Hemingway the writing of a story is a hard job, and for Mailer it is likewise something difficult, almost disagreeable, as he explicitly states in his books. This kind of metacommentary is visible in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, for example, as “the reporter” Mailer has to carry out his assignment for *Harper’s Magazine* to cover the political conventions of 1968: “He had an early plane in the morning, he was done, the job was done but for the writing. The reporter knew he had much to write about, but could he now enjoy writing it?” (MSC 213). We may also see Mailer’s difficulties in terms of sheer quantity, as compared to Hemingway: Mailer tries to turn his subjects to book-length narratives, nonfictional “novels,” whereas Hemingway’s reportages are “short stories,” sometimes very short.

Although Tom Wolfe may have himself confirmed his status as the instigator of the New Journalism, some recent criticism has pointed out the importance of Mailer’s “Superman Comes to the Supermarket” as the real starting point of this mode. As Louis Menand puts it, albeit somewhat harshly, Wolfe’s new journalistic work “from a literary point of view, is of relatively minor interest” especially as “[t]here is nothing in Wolfe to match the sheer intuitiveness” of Mailer’s journalism; thus:

²² Merrill, however, makes a comparison between *The Armies of the Night*, Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, and Hemingway’s *Green Hills of Africa*, arguing that “like Mailer, Hemingway and Capote do more than employ *some* of the devices of fiction in the service of nonfiction; they presume to employ *all* (or nearly all) fictional devices in the

Mailer was there before [Capote and Wolfe], and he went much deeper into the possibilities released by the undermining of traditional distinctions between fact and fiction. The techniques of fiction are precisely what made his piece [...], "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," such a famous performance [...]. Mailer viewed politicians with a novelist's eye; he read the inner man from the outer. (1998: 29)

In "Superman Comes to the Supermarket" Mailer is seeking for the right literary form to "cover" John F. Kennedy's presidential election in 1960, consciously filling the actual scene with the imagery and language of Hip ideology and figuring Kennedy as his potential real-life hipster: "Yes, this candidate for all his record, his good, sound, conventional liberal record has a patina of that other life, the second American life, the long electric night with the fires of neon leading down the highway to the murmur of jazz" (PP 31). However, instead of following the rules of "factual" reportage in this piece, Mailer forges, as it were, Kennedy's real image to suit his own narrative purposes: "It was a hero America needed, a hero central to his time, a man whose personality might suggest contradictions and mysteries which could reach into the alienated circuits of the underground, because only a hero can capture the secret imagination of a people" (PP 42).

In typically Mailerian style, his own myth-making procedure is called into question:

Too simple? No doubt. One tries to construct a simple model. The thesis is after all not so mysterious; it would merely nudge the notion that a hero embodies his time and is not so very much better than his time, but he is larger than life and so is capable of giving direction to the time, able to encourage a nation to discover the deepest colors of its character. (PP 42)

Finally, however, Mailer makes his way of figuring Kennedy as his real-life hipster explicit by means of a subtitle which self-consciously alludes to the Fielding-like novelistic convention of chapter abstracts: "*The Hipster as Presidential Candidate: Thoughts on a Public Man's Eighteenth-Century Wife; Face-to-Face with the Hero; Significance of a Personal Note, or the Meaning of His Having Read an Author's Novel*" (PP 44). In this chapter Mailer contemplates possible ways of approaching the candidate through

creation of what Capote calls the 'nonfiction novel'" (1992: 107). Hemingway's book clearly anticipates later works of literary nonfiction in its self-conscious discussion of its own aims and means through its paratextual framing and explicit reflection, though apparently *Green Hills of Africa* (1935) is meant to read like a novel. However, Merrill points out that Hemingway's book does not quite work as a novel, and thus its "internal coherence" does not appear to be more foregrounded than its "fidelity to fact" (ibid.: 108). Merrill even refers to a certain "weakness" of Hemingway's Africa book as a *novel*, so that its "concerns [...] are documentary and not novelistic, nonfictional and not imaginary" (ibid.).

various literary allusions, until a colleague of his makes a useful reference: “‘Well, there’s your first hipster,’ says a writer one knows at the convention, ‘Sergius O’Shaughnessy born rich,’ and the temptation is to nod, for it could be true” (PP 44).²³ What makes the reporter Mailer’s approach explicitly “literary” and self-ironically somewhat inept as journalistic groundwork, is the “significance” and “meaning” of the fact that Kennedy has probably “read an author’s novel.” What finally makes Kennedy Mailer’s “hero,” for a short period of time, is this discussion between two enigmatic characters:

As we sat down for the first time, Kennedy smiled nicely and said that he had read my books. One muttered one’s pleasure. “Yes,” he said, “I’ve read...” and then there was a short pause which did not last long enough to be embarrassing in which it was yet obvious no title came instantly to his mind, an omission one was not ready to mind altogether since a man in such a position must be obliged to carry a hundred thousand facts and names in his head, but the hesitation lasted no longer than three seconds or four, and then he said, “I’ve read *The Deer Park* and... the others,” which startled me for it was the first time in a hundred similar situations, talking to someone whose knowledge of my work was casual, that the sentence did not come out, “I’ve read *The Naked and the Dead*... and the others.” (PP 46-47)

“Superman Comes to the Supermarket” shows Mailer’s belief in the potentiality of Kennedy on the eve of his election, so there are “romantic” possibilities in the air. However, the subsequent 1963 collection *The Presidential Papers* (which includes the “Superman” essay) is written in the aftermath of the assassination, just like Mailer’s next novel *An American Dream*, which begins with a romantic note to Kennedy but ends in a dark apocalypse. We may see how Mailer’s early Kennedy romanticism contrasts with the pessimism that governs his book-length narratives about the figure of Richard Nixon.

Nixon and Diction: *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* and *St. George and the Godfather*

As I have argued above, the aesthetic basis of Mailer’s literary nonfiction can be found in his early collections and the separate pieces included in them. What is significant, however, is that Mailer’s more clearly autobiographi-

²³ Mailer’s subsequent political reportage “In the Red Light” is filled with literary allusions, which obviously carry some thematic point (including quotations from Edmund Burke, Nathaniel West, William Blake, and John Donne). Mailer writes: “Nobody of course was Quentin Compson, nobody spoke that way any more, but the question was posed by a ghost and so had to linger: was there indeed a death in the seed which brought us here?” (CC 22). Compare also Mailer’s other narratives about political conventions:

cal “I” of these essays and collections is transformed into an apparently more novelistic “he” or “Mailer” in his book-length nonfiction narratives of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968) Mailer uses a device he developed to a high craft, third-person storytelling based on first-person participation: “Styling himself ‘the reporter’ throughout, he is enabled by this broader point of view to stand back from himself as could not believably be done in a first-person narration” (Wicker 1986: vii). As it has also been noted, in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* Mailer reports the political conventions “via his patented third-person, self-inclusive narrative,” seeing the events “through the eyes of this journalistic/subjective admixture” (Keener 2001: 136). While *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* has been, in much Mailer criticism, overshadowed by its direct predecessor *The Armies of the Night*, *Miami* still presents a new invention in Mailer’s self-reflexive nonfiction. We should note that in *Armies* Mailer, as a character, is not a *reporter* participating in the event; in *Miami*, however, his assignment is to cover and report the political conventions for *Harper’s Magazine*. According to Jennifer Bailey, both *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* and its “sequel,” *St. George and the Godfather*, express “a genuine bewilderment as to which role this writer should assume: that of the passive and observing reporter or that of the literary man who participates in several of the events he witnesses” (1979: 101). The idea seems to be in a way reverse to that of *Armies*; if the March on the Pentagon appears afterwards to be good material to be turned into the form of the “novel/history,” in *Miami* Mailer has to write an article or two about conventions which appear to be devoid of any content and interest. In this way the hard work of writing something good out of emptiness emerges as a new theme in Mailer’s work.

The first part of *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, entitled “Miami,” deals with Mailer’s attempt to find an approach to the 1968 Republican convention held in that sunny city (“materialism baking in the sun” [MSC 14]). Mailer himself steps into the picture as “the Reporter” trying to find some angle and vision on the convention. However, at the very beginning we are told that “[t]he reporter had moved through the convention quietly, as anonymously as possible, wan, depressed, troubled” (MSC 14). This detached stance appears to reflect the emptiness and dullness of the Republican convention itself, and, as the reporter Mailer puts it, even “the

“While they debated, the reporter was having psychic artillery battles with the Mafia at the next table. (One might take a look at *An American Dream*, Chap. IV.)” (MSC 215); “It was worse than the worst moments in ‘The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber’ – once again, the protagonist was getting killed just when ready to become a man” (SGG 102).

dialogue with other journalists merely depressed him – the complaints were unanimous that this was the dulllest convention anyone could remember” (MSC 15). Robert Solotaroff remarks that the Republican convention offered no opportunity for dramatic action and thus few opportunities for dramatic thought (see 1974: 238). Therefore, the convention does not seem to promise such narrative and imaginative spice to a reporter’s thought and skills as those previous conventions (with Kennedy in 1960 as depicted in “Superman Comes to the Supermarket”; with Goldwater in 1964 as represented in “The Red Light”) that “had encouraged his [Mailer’s] very best writing” (MSC 14).

By adopting a detached position, Mailer (as a character) silently observes other reporters, media people, and of course politicians, as if gradually finding some narrative form and figurative explanation for the complex, non-narrative and seemingly meaningless happenings surrounding the convention: “[f]rom a distance one could always tell exactly where the candidate was situated, for a semicircle of cameras crooned in from above like bulbs of seaweed breaking surface at high tide, or were they more like praying mantises on the heads of tall grass? – a bazaar of metaphor was obviously offered” (MSC 20; my emphasis).²⁴ In fact, Mailer’s journalistic technique here not only foregrounds literal and metaphorical vision, but also aims to capture the *smells* and *sounds* of the convention (see MSC 22-23). As John Hollowell suggests, “Mailer’s gifts as a novelist, his powers of social observation, his eye for minute details, his ability to convey the subjective atmosphere of an experience make these narratives [like *Miami*] read more like novels than nonfiction” (1977: 90). While adopting self-consciously literary techniques for his narrative, Mailer also makes allusions to classical novelistic representation of characters: “She [Nixon’s daughter] had an extraordinary complexion – one would be forced to describe it *with the terminology of the Victorian novel*, alabaster and ivory could vie for prominence with peaches and cream” (MSC 29; my emphasis).²⁵

The culmination point of the book’s “Miami” section is, apparently, the appearance of the figure of Richard Nixon, a character not exactly close to Mailer’s deepest sympathies. However, the most memorable part of the

²⁴ Gerard Steen actually chooses *Miami* as an experimental text in his “empirical approach” to “understanding metaphor in literature” (1994: 54-55).

²⁵ This “Victorian” representation of a female character is recalled in *Harlot’s Ghost*, in Harry Hubbard’s romantic “framing” of Kittredge through similar imagery: “She could have been a heroine out of her father’s collection of painted Victorian damsels, pale as their cloisters, lovely as angels” (HG 150). See also Marilyn Monroe’s description in *Marilyn*: “Never will Marilyn exhibit so marvelous a female palette, her colors living in the shades of an English garden. A hue cannot appear on her face without bearing the tone

whole section is the fact that the reporter Mailer is obliged to revise his previous prejudices towards “Tricky Dick,” because “the reporter is obsessed with him,” and because “he has never written anything nice about Nixon” (MSC 41). The first reason to redefine one’s picture of the presidential candidate is simply that “[n]othing in [the reporter’s] view of Nixon had ever prepared him to conceive of a man with two lovely girls” (MSC 30), and because the reporter Mailer has “four fine daughters” himself, even Nixon cannot be all bad.²⁶ There seems to be a new Nixon here in Miami, and Mailer needs to reflect that “it was obvious something was wrong with the reporter’s picture,” for “either the man [Nixon] had changed or one had failed to recognize some part of his character from the beginning” (MSC 42). As Bailey suggests, Nixon’s persona has an effect on the reporter’s focus, which must change, because he (Mailer) “had not allowed for the possibility of the phoenix rising from the ashes of political defeat” (1979: 103). However, Nixon, whether actually a new person or still the old “devil” in disguise, emerges as a complex personality that cannot be represented through strict either/or logic. From a different angle of interpretation, we may see how Mailer constructs this “new” Nixon through self-conscious figuration of facts, for not only the actual convention but the *narrative text* itself seems to require complexities, surprises, and mysterious possibilities provided by Nixon’s character: “New and marvelously complex improvement of a devil, or angel-in-chrysalis, or both – good and evil now at war in the man, Nixon was at least, beneath the near to hermetic boredom of his old presence, the most interesting figure in the convention” (MSC 50).

In what follows, through a closer analysis of Nixon’s new, visibly developed media rhetoric and public performance, Mailer is able to “deconstruct” the most positive images suggested by the candidate’s first appearance:

So, now he talked self-consciously of how the members of his staff, counting delegates, were “playing what we call ‘the strong game.’” SMILE said his brain. FLASH went the teeth. But his voice seemed to give away that, whatever they

of a flower petal” (M 164). On the other hand, the description of Nixon’s other daughter (“a perfect soubrette for a family comedy on television. She was as American as Corporate Bakeries apple pie” [MSC 29]) is reminiscent of Stephen Rojack’s way of objectifying Cherry in *An American Dream*. Again, Cherry is partly modeled after Marilyn, and in Rojack’s final vision, these two women are in Heaven together (see AD 269).

²⁶ In *Miami* there appears, at least seemingly, to be a new Nixon just as there is a new Mailer. Their characters (on the political level radically opposite to each other) are even tentatively connected, since both are middle-aged family men, Nixon at the height of his political career, or close to it, and Mailer at the height of his literary career. In the “Chicago” section of his book, Mailer foregrounds the ‘conservative’ part of his character, now increasingly detached from the ‘revolutionary’ aspects of his former self: “He liked his life. He wanted it to go on, which meant that he wanted America to go on

called it, they probably didn't call it "the strong game," or if they did, he didn't. So he framed little phrases. Like "leg-up." Or "my intuition, my 'gut feelings,' so to speak." Deferential air followed by SMILE-FLASH. (MSC 47)

Mailer's analysis of Nixon's political rhetoric suggests that the old Nixon may after all lurk behind the sunny surface of the new one: "In the old days, he [Nixon] had got his name Tricky Dick because he gave one impression and acted upon another – later when his language was examined, one could not call him a liar" (MSC 70).²⁷ In *St. George and the Godfather* Mailer continues his analysis of Nixon's rhetoric, its calculated aims at "making an authentic move which gets authentic audience response" (SGG 199). Finally, Mailer's aim at seeing some fruitful dialectics in Nixon almost collapses, because the candidate still transmits the message of technological America that he (Mailer) deeply objects to: "[H]e indeed did not know if he was ready to like Nixon, or detested him for his resolutely *non-poetic binary system*, his computer's brain, did not know if the candidate was real as a man, or whole as a machine" (MSC 81-82; my emphasis).

As Mailer's confrontation with Kennedy in "Superman Comes to the Supermarket" had some 'literary' flavor (the author being delighted at the "fact" that the candidate had read one of his novels), we may note that Mailer's journalistic interest in Nixon in the "Miami" section has a similar tone. By self-ironically implying his amateurish work as a reporter and simultaneously foregrounding his literary preferences, the reporter, standing within two feet of Nixon at one point in the middle of the convention, is only able to conduct an imaginary question in his mind: "What, sir, would you say is the state of your familiarity with the works of Edmund Burke?" (MSC 49).²⁸ In fact, the figurative and literary means used by Burke in his

– not as it was going, not Vietnam – but what price was he really willing to pay? Was he ready to give up the pleasures of making his movies, writing his books? They were pleasures finally he did not want to lose" (MSC 188).

²⁷ Mailer appears to be equally critical toward the political rhetoric of the Democratic Party as analyzed in the "Chicago" section of the book; here, in the final speech of Hubert Humphrey, it is the question of pushing the rhetorically right buttons and evoking the right sentiments in the audience: "If sentiment made the voter vote, and it did! and sentiment was a button one could still prick by a word, then Humphrey was still in property business because he had pushed 'Testament' for button, 'America' for button, 'each and every one of us in our own way' – *in our own way* – what a sweet button is that! and 'reaffirm' – pure compost for any man's rhetoric, 'our posterity,' speaks to old emotion from the land of the covered loins, 'we love this nation' – pure constipation is now relieved – 'we love America'" (MSC 210). Mailer's collection of his reportage of political conventions from 1960 to 1976, *Some Honorable Men*, alludes in its title to those "honourable men" (Brutus and other Roman political conspirators) that Mark Antony's rhetoric famously ironizes in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

²⁸ Mailer's reportage of the 1964 Republican convention in his piece "In the Red Light" is filled with quotations from Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

historical narrative of the French Revolution – like his narrative rhetoric (“I must see the things; I must see the men” [see CC 23]) – are employed by Mailer both in “In the Red Light” and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*. On this basis, in one of his best-known reflections on historical/nonfictional writing Mailer speaks for the importance of a “nuanced” history: “It was a confrontation the reporter should not have missed. Were the Reagan girls livid or triumphant? Were the Negro demonstrators dignified or raucous or self-satisfied? It was a good story but the *Times* was not ready to encourage its reporters in the thought that *there is no history without nuance*” (MSC 56; my emphasis). Peter Conn notes, when speaking of Mailer’s style in his nonfiction, that his “finest prose takes shape at the intersection of public event and inner response” and that in Mailer’s reportage of political conventions, “a thousand engrossing details cohere in the scripts of modern morality plays” (1989: 530). While Mailer’s reporter-self criticizes the cold, detached, seemingly objective fact-gathering of his “fellow” reporters in the convention, he simultaneously constructs his own aesthetic-ethical manifesto according to which history must be told in detail and from various perspectives in order to reach at least a sense of its ultimate complexity.

However, once again Mailer’s journalistic practice contains self-critique, even self-negation, since the paragraph above opens with the reporter’s reflection that he should not have missed that confrontation with Ronald Reagan. The ethical and practical shortcomings of the reporter Mailer’s journalistic work are ironically and comically foregrounded throughout *Miami*: “If he had been more of a reporter (or less of one) he would have known that the Reagan forces were pushing an all-out attack to pry, convert, cozen, and steal Southern delegates from Nixon” (MSC 57); “[Reagan] did not know, he really did not know. Nor did the reporter” (MSC 73); “Of course he was to find out later that it was an evening which would end in the blackest depression” (MSC 74); “It occurred to the reporter *on reflection* that Nixon had not made the worst of moves for himself” (MSC 74; my emphasis); “The reporter was 1,500 miles away by then and could hardly have covered [the riot]” (MSC 81); “But since the reporter was not there, let us quote from the *Washington Post*” (MSC 149); “The reporter was not present at the Coliseum” (MSC 150); “The reporter did not know that the worst battle of the week had taken place not an hour ago” (MSC 151); “The reporter [was] watching in safety from the nineteenth floor” (MSC 172). As Genette writes in his *Fiction & Diction*, “retrospective narration is also common in factual narrative (it is the form most frequently encountered), but we also find prospective (prophetic or anticipatory) narration, simultaneous narration (reporting), and even interspersed narration, for example in

the diary form" (1993 [1991]: 68-69). In *Miami* Mailer's reporter character is partially comic and occasionally "like a character in a picaresque novel" (Hollowell 1977: 103). Mailer thus plays with classic narrative conventions, constructing his reporter-self as a character who is clearly less informed than he should be.

In the structural division of *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* the superficial circus atmosphere of the Republican convention is backgrounded by sunny Miami, whereas the convention of the Democratic Party takes place in Chicago, the hard, cold, and windy city "where nobody could ever forget how the money was made," for "it was picked up from floors still slippery with blood" (MSC 89). In the conclusion of the book there is a feeling that Chicago, Dreiser's great American city, provides more novelistic material than Miami, and obviously the second section of the book is richer and fuller in tone and content than the first: "And yes, he thought, Chicago was a great city. Finally, it brought everyone into the sort of ratiocinated confrontation which *could end a novel* about a week in this big city. You could not say that of Miami" (MSC 222; my emphasis). According to one critique, the book "is organized around an implausible contrast" between Chicago as an honestly brutal, violent, and therefore authentic city, and Miami Beach as something plastic, antiseptic, and therefore life-denying, and this contrast is "typical of the arbitrary schematism," one sign of Mailer's "forced mythology" (Graff 1979: 219-20). On the other hand, this kind of mythical dualism between the "natural" and the "artificial" is a central part of Mailer's personal philosophy. Thus, Mailer's juxtaposition of two cities (and two political parties) also reflects his common and prevailing notions about distinct American values. In the opening sections of "The Siege of Chicago," the second part of the book, Mailer's detailed description of the Chicago slaughterhouses obviously constructs a figurative parallel with the later violence in the streets as the young demonstrators are beaten by a random attack by the police. Missing the "opportunity" to participate in the demonstration, the reporter Mailer watches an astonishing scene from the position of his hotel room, "watching in safety from the nineteenth floor" as "there was something of the detachment of studying a storm at evening through a glass" (MSC 169). Mailer is both the voice and the focalizer of this account:

The police attacked with tear gas, and Mace, and with clubs, they attacked *like a chain saw cutting into wood*, the teeth of the saw the edge of their clubs, they attacked *like a scythe through grass*, lines of twenty and thirty policemen striking out in an arc, their clubs beating, demonstrators fleeing. Seen from overhead, from the

nineteenth floor, it was *like a wind blowing dust*, or the edge of the waves riding foam on the shore. (MSC 169; my emphases)

The stance of the reporter as spectator here conflicts with that of an involved literary man; as a result “the narrator describes [the events, their shock and horror] with the detachment of a theatre spectator” (Bailey 1979: 108). The “literariness” of Mailer’s subjective sight is here conveyed by his characteristic diction, his active use of metaphors and parables which reveal the violent nature of the scene.

By adopting the detached position of observation throughout the narrative, Mailer at the same time foregrounds his figurative, even mythological rendition of the actual events; it is as if he were replacing his temporary assignment as a journalist with his permanent profession as a novelist. This is emphasized as Mailer finally abandons the newspaper accounts and their failed attempt to give an objective and factual picture of the obscure and chaotic events, whose “true” nature is only partially captured by other distinguished writers on the scene (William S. Burroughs, Jean Genet, Allen Ginsberg, and Terry Southern). Instead, Mailer tries to find a larger, metaphorical vision:

[Y]es, there before the eyes of half the principals at the convention was this drama played, as if the military spine of a great liberal party had finally separated itself from the skin, as if, *no metaphor large enough to suffice*, the Democratic Party had here broken in two before the eyes of a nation *like Melville’s whale* charging right out of the sea. (MSC 172; my emphases)

As in Mailer’s next book, *Of a Fire on the Moon*, Melville’s *Moby-Dick* serves here as a central American metaphor, even though it is not altogether clear what the function of the metaphor is in this context. Mailer actually needs to reflect that there is no large metaphor or coherent symbol in his “Chicago” section which would bring together the absurd and chaotic feelings and events. In lieu of a unifying metaphor, he composes a list, almost a catalogue: “[a]n air of outrage, hysteria, panic, wild humor, unruly outburst, fury, madness, gallows humor, and gloom hung over the nominating night at the convention” (MSC 176).

Yet the search for a solid narrative, symbolic, even “novelistic” approach to the Democratic convention and the “Days of Rage” in Chicago yields an embedded plot in the second part of *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*. While trying to describe the Democrats, Mailer refers to his earlier pieces about political conventions (“He had written about it with the metaphor of a bullfight” [MSC 96]), and alludes to novelistic devices in his presentation of real-life characters: “One would have to be a great novelist to dare

to put this last remark in the mouth of a character so valuable as [Hubert Humphrey] (MSC 124). However, as with Miami, there seem to be few "novelistic" possibilities in Chicago, and here Mailer alludes to the literary and symbolic treasure-trove of the March on the Pentagon the previous year, the event that gave him the basis for *The Armies of the Night*. It has been noted that "whereas *Armies* proceeds from comic display to modest heroic action, 'Chicago' moves from guilty inaction to comic anticlimax, with Mailer's ambivalence and self-questioning dominating the mood" (Wenke 1987: 173). In *Armies*, then, the image of the power of the Pentagon (a beast with five eyes) provides a strong symbolic center for the protest, whereas no such symbol is present in Chicago:

The justifications of the March on the Pentagon were not here. *The reporter was a literary man* – the symbol had the power to push him into actions more heroic than himself. The fact that he had been marching to demonstrate against a building which was the living symbol of everything he most despised – the military-industrial complex of the land – had worked to fortify his steps. The symbol of the Pentagon had been a chalice to hold his fear; in such circumstances his fear had even flavored his courage with the sweetest emotions of battle. But in Chicago, *there was no symbol for him*. (MSC 144; my emphases)

Mailer's nonfiction following *The Armies of the Night* seems to be lacking "the most crucial *fictional* technique" that has given the former book its "conscious shaping of the given materials to the form of a dramatic action" (Merrill 1992: 133; my emphasis). Moreover, in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* Mailer "becomes less and less concerned with maintaining a literary center" (Richardson 1971 [1969]: 198). The problem seems to be structural, because the narrative lacks a literary center and hence feels less like a novel and more like journalism. Therefore, "the real problem is that 'The Siege of Chicago' reads very much like *three* separate narratives, all related by time and place but insufficiently united by an encompassing narrative structure" (Merrill 1992: 136). As I would argue, *Miami* self-reflexively comments on its own problems as a narrative that lacks both artistic narrative sequence (metonymy, syntagm) and symbolic structure (metaphor, paradigm). The "unfavorable" comparison with *Armies* is written into the narrative itself, because in "Chicago" Mailer had no suitable symbolic meaning to start with.

Mailer's pessimism about contemporary America is shown in the "Chicago" section in ways clearly reminiscent of *The Armies of the Night*. What is especially characteristic of Mailer here is that his disappointment is visibly connected to the lost possibilities of the modern novelist:

A revolutionary with taste in wine has come already half the distance from Marx and Burke; he belonged in England where one's radicalism might never be tested; no, truth, he was still enough of a novelist to have the roots of future work in every vein and stratum he had encountered, and a profound part of him (exactly that enormous literary bottom of the mature novelist's property!) detested the thought of seeing his American society – evil, absurd, touching, pathetic, sickening, comic, full of novelistic marrow – disappear now in the nihilistic maw of a national disorder. (MSC 187)

Miami and the Siege of Chicago is, thus, a strongly self-reflexive text, which discusses the narrative, symbolic and novelistic possibilities (present or absent) which could provide form and meaning to this particular book. In this sense, I regard it as one of the paradigmatic texts in Mailer's poetics of nonfiction.

The closest companion piece for *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* in Mailer's work is to be found not in its precursor, *The Armies of the Night*, but in its "sequel," *St. George and the Godfather* (1972), a report of the Republican and Democratic conventions of 1972. In *St. George* Mailer takes again the disguise of "Aquarius," who is his *alter ego* in *Of a Fire on the Moon*, and works hard to produce an interesting narrative. It seems, however, that the events themselves do not provide sufficiently interesting material for storytelling and plotting; instead it "promises to be an exhibit without suspense, conflict, or the rudiments of *narrative line*" (SGG 125; my emphasis). In the very beginning of the narrative, Mailer-Aquarius reflects that the convention is "dismaying in its absence of theater" (SGG 3); when compared to the Democratic gathering of 1968 ("martial, dramatic, bloody, vainglorious, riotous, noble, tragic, corrupt, vicious, vomitous, appalling, cataclysmic") depicted in *Miami*, this convention is "tedious, boring, protean, and near to formless" (SGG 3). When trying to find some narrative form and visionary angle for this problem-ridden non-dramatic event, Mailer self-reflexively foregrounds his choice of character role and narrative approach:

So Norman Mailer, who looked to rule himself by Voltaire's catch-all precept, "Once a philosopher, twice a pervert" and preferred therefore *never to repeat a technique*, was still obliged to call himself Aquarius again for he had not been in Miami two days before he knew *he would not write objectively* about the Convention of '72. [...] He would be obliged to drift through events, and use the reactions of his brain to evidence. A slow brain, a muddy river, and therefore no name better suited to himself again than the modest and half-invisible Aquarius. (SGG 3; my emphases)²⁹

²⁹ We may note that in his reportage of the 1990s Mailer still repeats his own journalistic principles when depicting political conventions. In "The War of the Oxymorons" (1996) he reflects that "it might be that only a novelist could hope to understand this particular Republican candidate [Bob Dole]" (TOT 1137); "How the Pharaoh Beat Bogey" (1997),

St. George and the Godfather is in many ways a rewriting of *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*; both narratives comprise Mailer's (or his reporter-self's) meetings with political candidates in a circus-like atmosphere and his reflections upon how to write his story about the conventions. In Bailey's analysis, *St. George* succeeds in its own right, transforming Mailer's role as a reporter into that of "an appreciative critic of the public performance," so that for him "a convention must be a dramatic performance in order that an understanding of its participants might be reached" (1979: 104). There is in the book both strong personal self-reflection ("Aquarius knew then why the convention was obliged to be boring" [SGG 86]) and authorial reflection on writing: "[T]he rueful admission to himself that for the days left in which to write his piece he must leave out much in order to be able to put this little in [the word 'tender']" (SGG 88). As in *Miami*, Mailer-Aquarius foregrounds his literary and novelistic approach to the events, partly even fictionalizing his factual materials, as it were: "The calendar never being so orderly as *the requirements of literary form*, Aquarius has his conversation with McGovern on the day after an interview with Henry Kissinger, but in memory the occasions were reversed" (SGG 113; my emphasis). In this self-conscious way, Mailer aims at giving some form and meaning to "that world of the unendurably complex," which makes him (or Aquarius) "think again of *focus*" (SGG 120; my emphasis).

While the conventions themselves may remain "complex," "warped," "formless," and without "a narrative line," Mailer-Aquarius finds some "artistic design" with the help of his own vision, searching for hidden mysteries behind the surface of happenings. Aquarius thus reflects on the convention as if it were a work of art: "[a]s if one were studying a huge canvas inch by square inch through the glow of a pencil light, a composition of splendid grasp began to reveal itself [...] it had been a work of such complexity that it would yet take the closest study of the design" (SGG 137-38). Aquarius argues that it is actually Richard Nixon who is the primary "artist" behind the convention, so that Nixon "had conceived of a convention which would possess *no* history," for "the [media] communication itself would be the convention" (SGG 178). It is then Nixon's own media convention, because "Nixon had succeeded in composing an artwork" (SGG 178), and "his own script became the one which would finally be filmed" (SGG 179). From his reportorial standpoint Mailer is able to narrate the process by which Nixon is swallowed up by his own "dehumanized image," but still Mailer is unable (and perhaps unwilling) to truly "reach" the real Nixon – "there

focusing on Bill Clinton's victory, opens with the remark that "[h]e had never taken an assignment as a reporter without looking to give himself a name" (TOT 1151).

is a tangible ‘screen’ between Mailer’s narrative and its mimetic referent” (Keener 2001: 137). In some sense, Mailer-Aquarius’s disappointment with politics in general and Nixon in particular becomes foregrounded in the ending, where Mailer-Aquarius refuses to shake hands with the “human” Nixon even though given the opportunity, and thus he continues to see the President only “whole as a machine” (SGG 82). What makes the convention especially boring is the nausea produced by the advance knowledge that Nixon will again be nominated.

Whereas in the first part of *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* Mailer showed some unexpected sympathy towards Nixon’s new role as a family man, in the closing pages of *St. George and the Godfather* he presents his harshest criticism of the President. The book’s title suggests a figurative battle between Governor George McGovern, the “Saint George” of the Democratic party, and Nixon, the “godfather” of the Republican Mafia. This is reminiscent of the mythical patterns governing *An American Dream* where the evil Deborah “had to be slain for the same reason that Saint George had to slay the dragon” (Gerson 1986 [1982]: 172). This time, however, in the real world of politics, the “dragon” wins the battle. The deep “subtext” in *St. George and the Godfather* is, obviously, the war in Vietnam, and Mailer constructs its continuing horrors as, among other things, a negative reflexion of Nixon’s successful media rhetoric.³⁰

Mailer’s Mythologies: Documentary as Romance

The Novel and the Romance

If we place Mailer’s fiction in the American literary canon, we may see how it is influenced by the long tradition which mixes the “romance” novel and the “realistic” novel – in terms of the distinction made by Richard Chase in his classical study on the American novel and its tradition (1980 [1957]: vii and *passim*; cf. Porte 1969: x, 229). As another classical study, Leslie

³⁰ The narrative as a whole ends by juxtaposing Nixon’s sentimental speech about a Russian girl’s diary of the World War II (“Let us build a peace that our children and all the children of the world can enjoy for generations to come”) with a diary of a Vietnamese girl of today’s war: “For the last five weeks the airplanes have been coming over. All are dead. Only T’Nayen writes this” (SGG 228). While Mailer documents Nixon’s speech about the Russian girl *Tanya* and her diary of the war, he provides his own, apparently allegorical tale about the Vietnamese girl *T’Nayen* and her diary of the war in

Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel*, argues, there is no single genre or mode such as "the American novel"; rather, there is a collection of variants of genres of the European tradition, including "American sentimental, American gothic, American historical romance, etc." (1984 [1960]: 24).³¹ It is interesting to note that Mailer's description of "the novel" in *The Armies of the Night* – "strange lights and intuitive speculation" – has been interpreted as coming close to the definitions of *romance*. This "romantic" notion means that "in describing what a novel should be [Mailer] describes almost exactly what Hawthorne's definition of the romance asserts," so that Mailer's "novel" is Hawthorne's "romance" (Coale 1985: 26, 208). In Mailer's most "romantic" novel, *An American Dream* (1965), even more than in the romance-novels of the nineteenth century, much happens on the level of the "magic" imagination or on the level where the ontologies of the real and the imagined are obscurely blurred. This kind of imaginative practice, associated with the romance tradition, was already reflected upon by Hawthorne in his "Custom-House" introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*: "Thus, therefore, the floor of our familiar room has become a neutral territory, *somewhere between the real world and the fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet*, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (1992 [1850]: 53; my emphasis). This "territory" where the real and the imaginary may come together, so that actuality is blended with fabulation, characterizes Mailer's fiction, and especially *An American Dream* more aptly than any bi-polar distinction between "realism" and "romance/allegory." Here I want to suggest that Mailer's art of nonfiction partly derives from his sense of the novel as a romance.

In his seminal study on the contemporary American novel, Tony Tanner calls Mailer's books (such as *Armies*) "demonized documentaries," arguing that "a writer seeking to get at American reality might do well to combine the documentary and the demonic modes, to develop a sense of magic without losing the empirical eye" (1971: 348). When discussing the

Vietnam. Here Mailer transcends the topical theme of the war and makes it "universal" (concerning children's suffering in any war); thus, whether or not T'Nayen's diary is "imaginary," it tells about real deaths.

³¹ The "romantic" influence in American fiction is still visible both in self-conscious novels (e.g., Barth's *Sabbatical: A Romance*; Roth's *American Pastoral*) and in literary criticism and theory. Bo Pettersson, referring to Chase's thesis, writes that "the American postmodern novel seems to have inherited the 'symbolic or ideological, rather than realistic, plausibility' of the romance-novel and the 'mythic, allegorical, and symbolistic forms' it takes" (1994: 13). Winfried Fluck recognizes a clear continuation of the romance theme in the national literature from Cooper to Pynchon: "The traditional definition of romance is that of a quest for an elusive goal, its characteristic narrative pattern that of a movement into unknown territories of 'other', imagined worlds, including the unknown territory of the self and the uncanny world of dreams" (1996: 422).

American literary imagination of the sixties, Tanner notes that in the work of Burroughs, Mailer, Pynchon and others, “demons” and “conspiracies” come to the fore. Like characters in Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* who search for their elusive Grail in the form of the V rocket in a complex dream reality, Mailer’s *Barbary Shore* is both a political allegory and an imaginative rewriting of the Arthurian legend where men in Lady Guinevere’s boarding house search for the mysterious “little object” (a reflection of the unreachable Lacanian Real). *Barbary Shore* is Mailer’s modern version of Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*, Mailer’s narrator Mikey Lovett resembling Hawthorne’s Coverdale, Guinevere mirroring Zenobia and so on, with an added irony that Mailer’s demonic right-wing agent Hollingsworth is juxtaposed with the social philanthropist Hollingsworth in Hawthorne’s novel. These men in Mailer’s novel are constructing imaginative visions of the pastoral future: “But if we succeed, what a period will follow! I am not a prophet dreaming of heaven, I do not assume that we leap at a bound from hell to Arcady. At least there will be, however, a soil in which man may play out his drama” (BS 263).³²

Barbary Shore is Mailer’s first experiment with non-realistic allegory and fabulation. As an early imaginative reflection of the paranoid and schizoid senses of post-war America, it clearly precedes even more imaginative and fabulative fictions of the sixties, like those of Barth, Heller, Pynchon, and Vonnegut. In his next fictional text after *Barbary*, the short story “The Man Who Studied Yoga,” Mailer gives his narrator, who filters the protagonist Sam Slovoda’s depression, his own credo, much cited since: “He cannot find a form, he explains. *He does not want to write a realistic novel, because reality is no longer realistic*” (AM 163; my emphasis).³³ These two early texts in the Mailer canon, *Barbary* and “Yoga,” are paradigmatic not only in their way of envisioning an “unreal” reality, but also in their metafictional con-

³² *Barbary Shore* has often been regarded as Mailer’s most uneven, mixed, and unsuccessful novel. For instance, Samuel Coale argues that “the windy political speeches and long tedious dialogues destroy *Barbary Shore* as a work of fiction” (1985: 35). While there may be some truth in this (at least from the biographical viewpoint, the novel’s process of production was painful to Mailer), there is still some sense in seeing it as a self-conscious experiment which brings together several different materials and generic forms: “Where novels mix older types, criticism already deals in terms of genre, up to a point. [...] Mailer’s *Barbary Shore* [will be said] to be unreadable because of its maladroit mixture of political treatise, diatribe, and thriller” (Fowler 1997: 34). Yet in *Advertisements for Myself* Mailer notes: “[m]uch of my later writing cannot be understood without a glimpse of the odd shadow and theme-maddened light *Barbary Shore* casts before it” (AM 86).

³³ For example, Lodge (1986 [1971]: 3), Zavarzadeh (1976: 159), and Tabbi (1995: 177n) see this aphorism as representing some of the central sensibilities in contemporary American writing.

struction of the narrative as concerned with the conditions and possibilities of its own production. On this basis we may argue that Mailer's subsequent poetics of nonfiction grows out, at least partly, from these early fictions followed by *The Deer Park*. Still, it needs to be emphasized that although *The Naked and the Dead* has remained Mailer's most popular and best-known novel, it is in many ways uncharacteristic of him and does not represent the "dominant" mode of his *oeuvre*. Of course, as a "realistic" novel, *Naked* is a rather complex case, for its artificial combination of distinct American social voices and its experimental technique derived from Dos Passos (the use of flashbacks in the "Time Machine" sections and its embedded play fragments called "Chorus") render the empirical reality as sometimes ambiguous, fragmented, and obscure. In Mailer's own words, *Naked* "is not a realistic documentary; it is, rather, a symbolic book" (Lennon [ed.] 1988: 7). The narrative is constructed upon symbolic and allegorical patterns, with the unreachable Mount Anaka as Mailer's self-proclaimed "Moby-Dick" motif, the mysterious center of primary action, and with the map of the imaginary island Anopopei serving as a *mise en abyme* construction, a miniature reflection of the plot and action of the narrative as a whole.³⁴

Emphasizing "the purely 'fictional' modes of allegory and romance," David Lodge suggests that in some writers' work a growth is observable from the basis of realism to the realm of allegory, so that "the writer finds himself in the region of myths, dreams, symbols and archetypes that demand 'fictional' rather than 'empirical' modes for their expression" (1986 [1971]: 5). More visibly than in the complex realism of *The Naked and the Dead*, in Mailer's *romance* narratives the representation of empirical reality is obscured by symbolical and allegorical overtones, and the fictional world is filled with more or less mystical powers. In his study on "romantic postmodernism" in American fiction, Eberhard Alsen focuses on Mailer's *An American Dream* among other works by different novelists (including

³⁴ Frank McConnell suggests that "Anopopei is a dream or nightmare island" (1977: 69). *The Armies of the Night* contains, in its first pages, a map of Washington D.C., including the river Potomac and the Pentagon, the symbolic center of the narrative's action. Thus, in the first major work of Mailer's nonfiction the "paratextual" framing of the narrative is an allusion to his first novel. In *The Naked and the Dead* the map of the imaginary island of Anopopei represents the strategies that both the Army and the narrative plot follow, and that map can be read as a metaphorical and allegorical reflection of the mythologies and fantasies that govern the deep structure of the seemingly naturalistic novel. In addition, as Mount Anaka stands in the middle of Anopopei, as a concrete and symbolic center of the plot and thematics of the narrative, the map in *Armies* places the Pentagon – the concrete and symbolic center of American power – in the visible scene. As Carl Rollyson also notes, both maps are metaphors "of campaigns and of armies moved by great conflicting forces of history" (1991: 204).

Auster, Barth, Bellow, Morrison, Pynchon, Roth, and Vonnegut) and suggests that “romance” is still a prevailing mode in postmodernist fiction, a mode combining “organic imagery, subjective characterization, philosophical or religious themes, and an idealist vision of life” (1996: 261). As Alsen argues, Mailer’s *Dream* is not a realistic novel but rather a postmodernist realization of the classic romance mode; its protagonist is not a realistically representative character but an extraordinary one, engaged in spiritual *quest* (see *ibid.*: 75). Terrence Doody likewise speaks about a melodramatic romance plot of *An American Dream*: Mailer’s fabulative novel has its links to both American naturalism (Dreiser) and, already through its early allusions to Fitzgerald, to “the tradition of self-conscious American romance” (1998: 67-68). *An American Dream* can thus be placed in the romantic tradition of American literary imagination, and one of its clear subtexts can be found in Washington Irving’s tale “Rip van Winkle” (1818), which constructs a typical male protagonist in American fiction, “a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat – anywhere to avoid ‘civilization’” (Fiedler 1984 [1960]: 26).³⁵ In his escape from civilization – after brutally murdering his “demonic” wife Deborah – Mailer’s narrator-protagonist Stephen Rojack tries to escape the requirements of behaving well and wants to meet the “evil” side in himself.

Most critics who have condemned *An American Dream* for its violent and obscene imagery (some from a feminist and others from an aesthetic perspective), have been eager to read it on realistic and referential levels, where Rojack’s imaginative acts of violence are closely connected with Mailer’s own personality. While some critics reading the novel on the level of reality reference see it as a kind of modern *Crime and Punishment* without any moral basis (see Rahv 1968: 236-37), other critics have commented that even such brutal acts as Rojack’s murder of his wife have, “in terms of the vision of life that the novel presents,” a “supremely moral” basis. This is because, as Alsen argues, Deborah is the Devil’s daughter and a symbol of dark American capitalist corruption, and therefore the killing is Rojack’s “first step in his quest to align his life with the positive principle, with God” (1996: 77).³⁶ This God is, apparently, Mailer’s idiosyncratic version of the embattled God forever fighting against the Devil and sometimes winning,

³⁵ In Judith Fetterley’s well-known feminist reading of “male American fiction,” Irving’s story is also seen as a classic pretext in the canon, and Mailer’s *An American Dream* becomes (in Fetterley’s sometimes harshly straightforward reading) “‘Rip Van Winkle’ one hundred and fifty years later, intensified to be sure, but *exactly the same story*” (1978: xxvi; emphasis in original).

³⁶ As Robert Begiebing argues in his study of “allegory and archetype” in Mailer’s work, we should recognize Deborah as “a mythological figure in a visionary world,” not to be translated into a merely literal character (see 1980: 62). Compare also: “In fact,

sometimes losing the fight. In his most famous essay, "The White Negro" (1957), Mailer defines the hipster's belief in God as follows:

God which every hipster believes is located in the senses of his body, that trapped, mutilated and nonetheless megalomaniacal God who is It, who is energy, life, sex, force, the Yoga's prana, the Reichian orgone, Lawrence's "blood", Hemingway's "good", the Shavian life-force; "It"; God; not the God of the churches but the unachievable whisper of mystery within the sex, the paradise of limitless energy and perception just beyond the next wave of the next orgasm. (AM 316)

"The White Negro" is a text which has often been read more 'referentially' than it perhaps should: is Mailer actually celebrating violence or only inventing imaginative and artistic tools for his new fictions?³⁷ According to Fetterley's critical viewpoint, the essay is "an exhortation to encourage the psychopath in oneself and to commit murder, if necessary, as that act of courage which alone will free one into creation and into love" (1978: 159). Mailer's new voice and new self is apparently highlighted by "The White Negro," but at least in retrospect some Mailer critics seem to overemphasize its centrality, the significance of its form, idea and style, in the Mailer canon: "[It] is a paradigm of the vision, the ideas, the motifs and symbols that will shape all of Mailer's future work in whatever shape" (Foster 1968: 25; cf. Ehrlich 1978: viii); it is "seminal Mailer," "essentially an act of myth-making presented in the form of an essay" (Wenke 1987: 71). Wenke goes on to argue that the readers of this myth-making essay "should not be concerned with an excavation of history but with a contemplation of mythic materials" and largely forget the dimensions of "the historical hipster" and instead "care about the hipster as the White Negro only insofar as he serves as the raw material of myth" (ibid.; see also Shoemaker 1991). When stressing that "The White Negro" is, finally, *a work of fiction* that introduces as

poetic effusiveness of *An American Dream* would suggest that we are dealing with a self-delighting fabulist playing with the possibilities of language, not with a brooding realist carefully recording real-life speech. It is unfair, it seems to me, to bring to bear on such a book the criteria of realism" (Bufithis 1978: 73). Other Mailer scholars have also defended the allegorical and romantic level of the novel; among these are Laura Adams ("the metaphoric level which Mailer develops in this novel runs parallel to the literal level as in a medieval dream-vision" [1976: 78]), John Aldridge ("one of Mailer's contributions was to rehabilitate the form of the romance and adapt it to the literary needs of the immediate present" [1972 (1965): 118]), and Carl Rollyson, who sees *An American Dream* as a "novel with the structure of a dream" (1991: 179).

³⁷ The essay easily provokes different interpretations in different contexts. When published separately, in *Dissent* in 1957, it was read rather as a social and political manifesto of a new sexual and revolutionary prophet. However, in the context of *Advertisements of Myself*, where it was reprinted, "The White Negro," owing to its place in the structure of the collection, emerges as reflecting Mailer's new imaginative ideas.

its hero a characteristic protagonist of Mailer's later novels, Wenke hardly succeeds in making a useful distinction between this essay and Mailer's subsequent fabulative fiction. What makes "The White Negro" seminal in the Mailer canon is not only its romantic-mythic model, its driving force, which provides new energy for Mailer's writing, including his fiction. In my view, this essay has a status as Mailer's first important work of *nonfiction*, implying that his true powers may finally reside outside the more or less conventional novelistic mode as represented by *The Naked and the Dead*, *Barbary Shore*, and *The Deer Park*.

"The White Negro" constructs part of the basis for Mailer's subsequent fictional imagination, first experimented with in the short story "The Time of Her Time" (1959), also published in *Advertisements for Myself*. As the essay announces, "Hip is the sophistication of the wise primitive in a giant jungle" (AM 308). In "The Time of Her Time" we find the reincarnation of Sergius O'Shaugnessy (from *The Deer Park*), self-consciously creating himself as "a Village stickman," searching for his "apocalyptic orgasm" (AM 443-445), and believing himself to be a new prophet of sex, "a saint" and "the Messiah of the one-night stand" (AM 434), who could finally release a young Jewish woman from her intellectual constraints and help her to enter "the time of her Time" (AM 444). Sergius is an artificial, experimental "White Negro" who adopts the "Black" language and style, and therefore a fictional realization of the hipster whose figure Mailer creates in his essay. We may recall that "The White Negro" discusses explicitly the language of Hip, which is "an artful language, tested and shaped by an intense experience and therefore different in kind from white slang" (AM 313). While "The Time of Her Time" is Mailer's first fictional experiment with both the philosophy and the language of the hipster, and while Sergius acts and lives on the level of his language, the fullest realization and dramatization of this philosophy and language can be found in *An American Dream*.³⁸

In order to understand Mailer's private mythologies, we need to locate his vision in the larger tradition of Gnosticism and especially Manicheism, at the core of which is a dualist view of God and man and the idea of the

³⁸ Like *Advertisements for Myself*, Mailer's subsequent novel *An American Dream* can be read as a self-conscious play and experiment with literary forms, "a conscious literary put-on with a serious point, a freewheeling fantasy ultimately concerned with real things, part fairy tale, part comic strip, part melodramatic farce, part parody, at times perhaps an exercise in novelistic Pop Art, yet anchored in the social and moral actualities with which we live" (Alter 1984 [1970]: 55). *An American Dream* seems to liberate Mailer's imagination and experimentation, since in the following years he produces both considerable works of fiction and nonfiction. Without *Dream*, then, there would probably be no *Armies or Fire*.

eternal battle between the Lord (“the Father of Light”) as the positive principle and the Devil (“the King of the Dark”) as a negative principle (see Alsen 1996: 73-74; cf. Harap 1987: 157).³⁹ That God is for Mailer a positive principle whereas the Devil represents the negative one becomes clear when we reflect that Mailer, while not denying their existence, employs them as cosmic macro-metaphors: “If God embodies everything that moves towards growth and potential fulfilment in the search for a satisfactory – that is dynamic – form, the Devil is waste: that is, institutional life, mass communication and uniformity” (Bailey 1979: 49; cf. Poirier 1972: 112-114). In Mailer’s philosophical scheme, “God” represents *natural* things (birth; trees and plants; countryside), while “the Devil” designates *artificial* things (control; plastic; modern architecture). As Mailer says in a relatively early interview reprinted in *Advertisements for Myself*, “God is not all-powerful; He exists as a warring element in a divided universe,” and as Mailer further argues, we human beings are “embodiments of that embattled vision” (AM 380-81). This dualism between good and evil is reflected in man’s nature, and the primary function of human beings is to take part in that struggle, in the sense that “our” strength and courage can potentially also strengthen God and diminish the power of the Devil. It may be interesting to note that Mailer’s Jesus in *The Gospel According to the Son* is a representative of *this* “religion,” as he must ask on the cross whether God his Father is all-powerful and reflect upon the possibility that “if I had failed Him, so had He failed me” (GAS 232). In Mailer’s philosophy, God is not love but *courage*; Jesus (perhaps surprisingly to some readers) is actually the bravest of Mailer’s “fictional” characters, for he dares more than others. The closing words of his first-person narration represent one crystallization of a Mailerian ethos: “For love is not the sure path that will take us to our good end, but is instead the reward we receive at the end of the hard road that is our life and the days of our life” (GAS 242). Accordingly, in *An American Dream* Stephen Rojack contemplates: “Comfortless was my religion, anxiety of anxieties, for I believed God was not love but courage. Love came only as a reward” (AD 191). While Rojack is a more negative character than Jesus in Mailer’s fictional worlds, it is only from this “religious” perspective that we may approach in any positive sense Rojack’s brutal killing of his “demonic” wife Deborah in *An American Dream*.

As suggested above, Mailer’s romantic and mythological schemes construct the basis for his fiction and nonfiction alike; next, I will discuss this thematics in what may be his most notorious book, *The Prisoner of Sex*.

³⁹ Mailer’s obsessive mystical thematics often directs his most journalistic works as well; see, for example, his article “Christ, Satan, and the Presidential Candidate: A Visit to Jimmy Carter in Plains” (1976; reprinted in TOT 948-959).

Creation and Liberation: *The Prisoner of Sex*

Failure to recognize Mailer's characteristic themes and their connection to specific literary conventions and mythological traditions has resulted in a large body of monotonously referential readings of his works. It is regrettable that Mailer's "character" is still defined, in many sectors of the literary-theoretical establishment, by such ideological readings as Kate Millett's in *Sexual Politics* (1969) and by statements of its numerous followers.⁴⁰ Millett's chapter "Norman Mailer" is included in the larger section appropriately entitled "The Literary Reflection" (also including discussions of D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, and Jean Genet). In Jonathan Culler's approving words, "Millett's strategy in reading as a woman is 'to take an author's ideas seriously when, like the novelists covered in this study, they wish to be taken seriously'" (1982: 47; see Millett 1977 [1969]: xii). The very beginning of Millett's analysis of Mailer and his work would appear to be sound: "Mailer is paradoxical, full of ambivalence, divided conscience, and conflicting loyalties" (1977 [1969]: 314).⁴¹ Eventually, however, Millett stops short of fully exploring these obvious paradoxes, ambivalences, and complexities in Mailer's work. Instead, by reading the author's prose as "both didactic and biographical," she traces Mailer's "obsessions" which make his characters "repeat themselves from one book to the next" and, by stripping Mailer's "arguments" of their contexts, pays little or not attention

⁴⁰ A number of women critics, however, present Mailer's relationship with feminism in a more nuanced way. The novelist Joyce Carol Oates suggests that the reason that "Mailer has become the central target of the fiercest and cruelest of Women's Liberation attacks" is above all due to the fact that "he is so dangerous a visionary, a poet, a mystic – he is shameless in his passion for women, and one is led to believe anything he says because he says it so well" (1974 [1971]: 216). From the viewpoint of practical politics (a field not unfamiliar to Mailer), it has been argued that "not all Women's Liberationists see Mailer as their enemy," for "[m]any of his political and personal views are similar to those of the feminist movement" (Gerson 1986 [1982]: 181). In the beginning of *The Prisoner of Sex*, Mailer is told by others that "he was, as he knew all too well, perhaps the primary target of [Women's Liberation] attacks. No, said the Author, he has not realized. 'Well, you may as well face it. They seem to think you're their major ideological opposition'" (PS 16). In his next book *St. George and the Godfather* Mailer (as "Aquarius") actually admits that "Women's Liberation had given birth to some revolutionary ideas which he had to respect" (SGG 58).

⁴¹ Compare also another feminist reading of Mailer's work, especially *An American Dream*, by Fetterley: "Mailer, of course, makes a fetish of being male; but what gives his fetishism its unique quality is the fact that it is impossible to determine to what degree it is parody and to what degree it is endorsement. Mailer is the embodiment of what he criticizes and the criticism of what he embodies" (1978: 155). Fetterley argues interestingly that "by a slight readjustment his [Mailer's] work can be read as a manifesto for revolu-

to whether they come from imaginative fiction or truth-claiming nonfiction (see *ibid.*: 328, 315). As Jennifer Bailey notes, on the other hand, Mailer is too difficult a writer for Millett, and “Millett reveals her misunderstanding of Mailer’s writing in her reliance upon conventionally defined literary genres” (1979: 130). As Millett writes, “the most fascinating problem in dealing with [Mailer’s] writing is to establish the connection between his fiction and his other prose writings, for ideas one is convinced are being satirized in the former are *sure* to appear with *straightforward* personal endorsement in the latter” (1977 [1969]: 328; my emphases). While it is also my aim to establish a connection between Mailer’s fiction and his other writing (nonfiction), Millett’s success in such a project is undermined by her being “sure” about the “straightforward” nature of Mailer’s nonfictional discourse.

The Prisoner of Sex (1971), Mailer’s literary response to Millett, scrutinizes among other things the shortcomings and inadequacies of her literary criticism. While Mailer’s book has gained notoriety, we should recall that even some subsequent feminist critics recognize Mailer as being the first to point to problems with Millett’s method of “literary reflection” (the title of her analytical chapter), which sees literary texts as direct reflections of social reality and sexual politics (e.g., Todd 1988: 22).⁴² On the one hand, while the book holds a controversial status in the Mailer canon, some critics express their surprise about how “clean” and “hearty” the book is (cf. Solotaroff 1974: 253). On the other hand, as Culler suggests, Mailer’s defense of Henry Miller against Millett’s criticism “confirms Millett’s analysis of Mailer himself, as ‘a prisoner of the virility cult’” (1982: 47-48). As Millett’s method of reading is to take male writers “seriously” (that is, to read their arguments on a denotative level, whether or not they write fiction), in *The Prisoner of Sex* Mailer seems to respond by employing his characteristic self-conscious narrative mode, speaking of “himself” in the third person. Thus the “authorial” voice of the text is somewhat disguised by and filtered through various roles and postures that “Mailer” takes, and the careful reader of the narrative should consider these roles and voices instead of directly attaching all arguments to the flesh-and-blood Norman

tionary feminism” (*ibid.*: 156-157). What she obviously proposes is a resistant reading that turns Mailer’s mythologies upside down; still, by contrast to more traditional male writers, Mailer’s complex ambivalences open the very possibility to creative resistance.

⁴² Millett’s own response to *The Prisoner of Sex* is rather grim: “[It] seemed to me very inferior to [Mailer’s] usual stuff. It was mean-spirited and vitriolic. [...] If you’re an important writer, as he surely is, it’s a tragic error to pit yourself against any progressive movement or any movement for human rights. [*The Prisoner of Sex*] was just a tirade, bombast, a scratching for old patriarchal grips someplace” (Manso 1985: 524-525).

Mailer (the reader still being conscious of the possibility that Mailer is seriously communicating his private philosophy here). In fact, when adopting various possible roles in the beginning of his narrative (“Prisoner” or “Prizewinner”), Mailer reflects that his narrative voice balances the “polar concepts to be regarded at opposite ends of his ego” (PS 9). The narrative, which begins in the “Year of the Polymorphous Perverse,” that is 1969, even distinguishes between Mailer’s private and public roles: “While the Prizewinner was packing lunches this picnicking summer [in Maine], the particular part of his ghost-phallus which remained in New York – his very reputation in residence – had not only been ambushed, but was apparently being chewed half to death by a squadron of enraged Amazons” (PS 13).

In the embedded plot of *The Prisoner of Sex* Kate Millett is as a kind of discursive “enemy” of Norman Mailer, emerging first through her style of writing in a magazine article: “[Mailer] read only a few lines, but it was enough to think [Millett] wrote like a gossip columnist. ‘*An American Dream* is an exercise in how to kill your wife and be happy ever after’” (PS 27).⁴³ Mailer then turns to Millett’s book *Sexual Politics*: “[o]f course he would use the book – it had twenty-five pages on him!” (PS 70). In *Prisoner* Mailer explicitly defends two of Millett’s “masculine” writers, D.H. Lawrence and Henry Miller (and implicitly also himself), against her methods of study: “A sawed-off shotgun is her tool” (PS 93), and “the art of [her] argument [...] was to ignore forever what did not fit” (PS 94). Mailer visualizes Millett’s best-selling doctoral dissertation as a flat space of scientific jargon, a textual “country” which it is no pleasure to walk through:

By any major literary perspective, the land of Millett is a barren and mediocre terrain, its flora reminiscent of a Ph.D. tract, its roads a narrow argument, and its horizon low; [...] her land was a foul and dreary place to cross, a stingy country whose treacherous inhabitants (were they the very verbs and phrases of her book?) jeered at difficulties which were often the heart of the matter, the food served at every inn was a can of ideological lard, a grit and granite of thesis-factories turned out aggregates of concept-jargon on every ridge; [...] bile and bubbles of intellectual flatulence coursed in the river, and the bloody ground steamed with the limbs of every amputated quote. (PS 93, 95)

Mailer’s spatial and geographical metaphors (controversial and overstated as they may be) suggest that the theoretical perspective constructed in Millett’s thesis is monotonous and one-sided.

⁴³ Mailer’s debate with the Women’s Liberation Movement (and especially with Germaine Greer) in a convention held in New York in 1971 is documented by Chris Hegedus and D.A. Pennebaker in *Town Bloody Hall*, a film released in 1979. Millett refused to take part in the discussion, mainly because of Mailer’s presence.

According to Mailer, Millett forces her objects of study (Lawrence, Miller, Mailer) into pre-formulated ideological frameworks refusing to hear the sounds and styles of individual writers and their separate works, citing only those textual segments that fit into her overall theory: "Witness how our *literary commissar* [Millett] will void the strength of Lawrence's style by cutting off our acquaintance with the marrow of his sensibility, the air of his senses" (PS 145; my emphasis). Relying on this methodological apparatus, the theorist (becoming no less than a totalitarian figure) "loses" her subject, being unable to follow complex literary texts into the various interpretative possibilities that they always provide. Therefore, Millett fails to see the ironies and ambivalences behind the brutal surface texture of Miller's work: "[t]hat was where she once again lost Miller" (PS 119). The problem is that Miller's "work dances on the line of his dialectic," but "Millett hates every evidence of the dialectic" (PS 119). Thus, according to Mailer, Millett "has a mind like a flatiron, which is to say a totally *masculine* mind" (PS 119; my emphasis).⁴⁴ Mailer does not defend himself against the counter-readings of Millett or another early feminist critic, Mary Ellmann, by simply stating that they are wrong (actually he is conscious that "of course, it is denigration of woman she [Millett] protests, the reduction of woman to object" [PS 113]); rather, he asks them to make close textual analysis in order to prove their theses: "All that sexual disgust attributed to him [Mailer in *An American Dream*], [was] actually a set of connections which existed only in her mind. [I]f [Ellmann] could not be fair to [Mailer], she could not be fair to her theme" (PS 26). It has been proposed, then, that Mailer's quarrel with Women's Liberation is carried out on the level of textual analysis, for "he desires to expose its discourse as 'totalitarian' and governed by the principles of technique" (Schuchalter 1995: 132). Mailer is appalled at the language of feminist theorists like Germaine Greer, and by detesting the elimination of emotion and mystery he actually takes his stance on the side of romantic poetry and prophecy: "What happened to Blake's most lovely idea that 'Embraces are cominglings from the Head to the Feet'?" (PS 77).

As Jessica Gerson argues in her insightful reading of Mailer's philosophy and mythology, Millett's "misfired shots" against Mailer are based on her limited knowledge of the basis of Mailer's most characteristic thoughts and

⁴⁴ As Peter Schwenger suggests, Mailer is critical toward "outward-oriented masculinity" in any style of writing, be it James Jones's or Kate Millett's "military" style. Mailer's own bending towards mysticism can be, according to Schwenger, tentatively called a non-masculine element, and on this level Mailer's style is closer to Lawrence than Miller: "[The] mystical element comes increasingly to the fore as Mailer's career progresses, and is explicitly elaborated in metaphysical essays on mood, on food, on time and the

strongest opinions. According to Gerson, it needs to be taken into account that “Mailer’s philosophy, as expressed in his novels and non-fiction, is solidly rooted in the traditions of Jewish mysticism” and that “his sexual attitudes, for instance, can be understood only in the light of his mystical preoccupation with the nature of God and how He manifests Himself” (1986 [1982]: 167-168). As noted above, Mailer believes that men (and women) are embodiments in the embattled vision which consists of the struggle between God and the Devil, and that “we” should take part in that everlasting battle. When Mailer states in *The Prisoner of Sex*, in a seemingly cryptic way, that sex is “the mirror of how we approach God” (PS 117), this thought may find a solid link with Jewish mysticism, namely the philosophy of the *kabbala*. In the dualistic world-view of the *kabbala*, deriving from both Gnosticism and Manicheanism, the feminine is on the side of the “negative” and the “demonic,” representing a systematic and unchanging power, whereas “the masculine” is on the side of intuition, inspiration, and creation, always changing and potentially fragile. This division between the feminine and the masculine explains the mythic patterns of *An American Dream*, where Deborah, the “Devil’s daughter” (representing the figure of Lilith, the female demon in Jewish mythology), sides with money and corruption, whereas Rojack is forever searching for some change in his life, ultimately through the “creative” act of murdering his wife. In contrast to Deborah, young Cherry represents the more benign, redemptive, and creative female in the kabbalistic tradition, being actually a “sign” sent by God to Rojack, and offering him both love and grace on his violent and dangerous route to possible salvation.

As Mailer’s mythology, which is almost directly connected to the Jewish and kabbalistic tradition, suggests, the masculine principle contains the idea of inspiration, struggle, and “creation” both in a sexual and artistic sense. In this model, “woman” is either the evil “system,” an enemy of inspiration and creation, or a *positive* feminine principle, the passive, nurturing recipient of a man’s active creative force, a “principle” without which the created form would never be realized (see Gerson 1986 [1982]: 169-170). As Mailer puts it in *The Prisoner of Sex*, “women, like men, were human beings, but they were a step, or a stage, or a move or a leap nearer the creation of existence” (PS 60). Mailer’s “dialectical” model presents the

afterlife, on all manner of psychic odysseys. It is unwarranted to call this mysticism a ‘female’ element, but it is certainly the antithesis of the stress on surface which Mailer claims is characteristic of writing for men” (1984: 33). Through a seeming paradox, then, Schwenger argues that in Mailer’s work there emerges “an aggressively virile narrator with a feminine sensibility” (ibid.: 34).

sexual act and the artistic act as similar kinds of creation, in an ideal sense “producing” either a beautiful child or a great work of art. The *creative* act of sex requires, in Mailer's kabbalistic version, a “dialectical” opposition between man and woman, that is, a clear difference between the sexes. In Mailer's reading, D.H. Lawrence becomes “the sacramental poet of a sacramental act,” a poet-prophet who sees that the greatest expression of human existence is “a man and woman fucking with love” (PS 134, 135). Whereas Henry Miller is “dialectical” (PS 119) in Mailer's scheme, Lawrence is “a cauldron of boiling opposites” (PS 137), and Mailer believes that both life and creativity emerge from this basis. The creative act of sex “mirrors” God (or the Devil) because man's spiritual and physical functions are analogous to the divine process: “Grace, life or joy cannot flow from the upper worlds until the proper couplings (called *zivvug*) of the *sefiroth* occur, in the world below” (Gerson 1986 [1982]: 173). On this level we may contemplate Mailer's *serious* belief that both men and women should find their “perfect couple” in this world and together search for “the ultimate orgasm” (their Holy Grail, as it were) as a means of transcendence and as a step closer to God (which simultaneously means a step further away from the Devil, whose realm is reached through “ugly and vulgar” acts). In the final paragraph of *The Prisoner of Sex* Mailer transforms his “social” program into a mystical explanation in the style of the kabbalistic tradition:

Finally, he would agree with everything they [women] asked but to quit the womb, for finally a day had to come when women shattered the pearl of their love for pristine and feminine will and found the man, yes that man in the million who could become the point of the seed which would give an egg back to nature, and let the woman return with a babe who came from the root of God's desire to go all the way, wherever was that way. And who was there to know that God was not the greatest lover of them all? The idiocy was to assume the oyster and the clam knew more than the trees and the grass. (PS 233-234)

There are obviously good reasons for Millett and others to dismiss Mailer's mythological essentialism, but it should still be noted that many “political” readings of Mailer's work do not actually work on the level of close textual analysis, but rather “impose” their pre-formulated ideological models on his individual texts.⁴⁵

Mailer's reliance on Jewish mysticism explains his strong belief in “the dialectical interplay of opposites,” and thus “this kabbalistic viewpoint

⁴⁵ From the vantage point of poetics, Lubomír Doležel characterizes the shortcomings of ideological analysis (typically represented by theorists like Terry Eagleton and other Marxists) in the following way: “The ideologue first represents the world in terms and categories of a certain, usually authoritative, ideological system; then the ideologue inter-

brings him into virtually irresolvable conflict with that aspect of feminist ideology which tends to regard most sexual differentiation as the product of erroneous social conditioning” (Gerson 1986 [1982]: 169). Gerson cogently explains that it is quite difficult to evaluate Mailer’s views on these subjects because not everyone is comfortable about living with such paradoxes and dialectical notions. As Culler, for one, implies, *The Prisoner of Sex* is a “sexist” text which must be deconstructed or which perhaps deconstructs itself; in this sense, “to deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies, by identifying in the text the rhetorical operations that produce the supposed ground of argument, the key concept or premise” (1982: 54, 86). In any case, in order to begin the possible deconstruction of Mailer’s premises and arguments, we need to locate their mythological and philosophical bases. Culler and Millett do not do this. For them Mailer’s book is simply an exercise in “male ideology,” and thus a rather easy target for political counter-reading. As Barbara Lounsbury suggests, *Prisoner* should not be read as a profound exploration of gender issues but rather as “a rhetorical ‘gang-bang’ of feminists,” written “ultimately for the purposes of art,” and so “readers would be well advised that the most interesting action occurs at the level of sexual metaphor rather than that of political and social ideas” (1990: 169). In addition, it is important to note that Mailer emphasizes his “novelistic” approach when proceeding towards his conclusions, reflecting upon an “implied” or “embedded” novel-in-progress.

Rather early in his narrative Mailer informs the reader that “the themes of his life had gathered here” – themes like revolution, tradition, sex, orgasm, technology, waste, the male mystique and so on – and they also belonged to “that huge novel he had promised to begin so many times” (PS 30). Mailer further reflects that “obviously, no journalist could have done the job – it was work which called for a novelist, or a critical approach, and the last was certain to return the burden to the reader” (PS 36). This sounds as if beneath the factual surface of the book there lives and moves a *potential* novel, perhaps a fictional one, which, if it ever emerges, will accomplish the things that *this* book is not able to carry out. At the end of *The Prisoner of Sex* Mailer’s narrative voice concludes: “So he would step aside by remarking that a look at sex and violence was the proper ground of a novel

prets the literary work in those same terms and categories. It should come as no surprise that ideological interpretation is always ‘correct’ because the transcription of the literary work and representation of the world are derived from one and the same totalizing conceptual frame” (2000: 641).

and he would rather try it there" (PS 231).⁴⁶ However, a few pages earlier there is a reprinted paragraph from *An American Dream* which is very much "about" these questions, sex and violence (see PS 225-226). In this way Mailer "embeds" his own poetic answer by citing a passage from one of its climatic scenes of his own novel, where Rojack finds true love for the first time with Cherry:

Somewhere in the middle, born out of fatigue and tension and exhaustion of every lie I had told today, like a gift I did not deserve, that new life began again in me, sweet and perilous and so hard to follow, and I went up with it and leaped and flew over, vaulting down the fall to those washed-out roses washed by the tears of the sea, they washed out to me as my life went in, and I met one cornucopia of flesh and sorrow, scalding sorrow, those wings were in the room, clear and delicate as a noble intent, that sweet presence spoke of the meaning of love for those who had betrayed it, yes I understood the meaning and I said, for I knew it now, "I think we have to be good," by which I meant we have to be brave. (AD 154-155)

Mailer's "poetic" answer is framed by the consciously romantic imagery of Rojack's narration ("those washed-out roses washed by the tears of the sea") and his long, searching sentences which reflect the elusiveness of the subject (love) itself. Consequently, as to the complexities of sex and love, which are "scientifically" explained away by technologically oriented feminists and other modern totalitarian thinkers, "there is no telling, there is never any telling, which is why novelists are forever obsessed with the topic, it is an endless frontier" (PS 191).⁴⁷ Unlike these "totalitarians" who aim at lifeless systems (such as the negative principle in the kabbala, representing the power of systematization), Mailer (as a self-appointed repre-

⁴⁶ Indeed, the centrality of *Advertisements for Myself* in the Mailer canon is based on its implication that "a source of stimulation for his best writing has always been the *next* project" and "in retrospect the very real accomplishment of *Advertisements* must be seen to depend largely on its many unfulfilled promises" (Tabbi 1995: 51). As Joe Moran suggests, both *The Prisoner of Sex* and *Marilyn*, written under the pressure of financial constraints and contractual obligations, lead Mailer to "the admission that he would rather be at work on the 'big novel' than producing the work we are reading" (2000: 73). The "big novel," haunting Mailer's work throughout the decade, and an influence especially behind *The Fight*, appears to be *Ancient Evenings*, written between 1972 and 1982. As Bailey notes, "Mailer's self-conscious tactics [...] have and will always operate best under a sense of threat. Whenever he has risked and apparently lost most, he has produced his best work" (1979: 143).

⁴⁷ In *St. George and the Godfather*, his work following *Prisoner*, Mailer (through the voice of his *alter ego* Aquarius) continues his analysis of Women's Liberation as a kind of totalitarian movement especially with regard to its relation to *language* and *style*. While the modern "totalitarian" movement was basing its ideology on "scientific jargon," Mailer-Aquarius "had a simple idea" that "language had been a creation of the female, first forged from the sounds of communication between herself and her young" (SGG 57). In this sense, a "totalitarian" language represents a kind of anti-language with no style.

sentative of the kabbala's positive principle including intuition, inspiration, and striving) wants to leave the questions open, moving, and "searching." As in his other writings, Mailer takes his side on poetic imagination instead of scientific explanation (or journalistic discussion, for that matter) because, "[w]e just don't know what the *real* is" (PS 198). This kind of endless romantic quest involves *Barbary Shore* and *An American Dream*, among his other works.

As Gerson concludes, "in the final analysis, Mailer is not sure of any answers," and thus "the structure of *The Prisoner of Sex*, like Mailer's mind, see-saws between traditionalism and anarchistic individualism" (1986 [1982]: 180). The reflexive readings of *Prisoner* may state that "Mailer's attack, then, is not against women but against an excessively *masculine* culture shot through with technology and a social production of reality that has little to do with desire and everything to do with control" (Tabbi 1995: 59). As Joseph Wenke argues, "indisputably, on the issues of sex and women's liberation the exotic hybridity of Mailer's left conservatism is in fullest bloom," for in *Prisoner* he "succeeds, despite the appearance of engagement, in standing utterly by himself, defining a position that is at once romantic, existential, mystical, moralistic, and essentially reflective of no one's beliefs but his own" (1987: 164-65). If the reader of nonfiction must be allowed, as I claim in this study, to take a reading position which attaches the claims and intentions of the narrative to the actual author who has produced the text, whatever its self-conscious play with literary form, a text like *The Prisoner of Sex* needs to be related to the general values of its author. Yet the author's ideology, ethics, and aesthetic practice may change in the course of time: thus, one has to allow for the possibility that there is not always the same "Mailer" in every text.⁴⁸

Artists and Heroes: Mailer's Biographical Mode

Many real-life protagonists of classical biographies have become colorful, novel-like characters, and the accuracy of their presentation in texts, and consequently the factuality of those texts, has become, to some extent, a secondary question. Mailer's two main biographies, *Marilyn* ("A Novel

⁴⁸ In this respect, the importance of the concept of the implied author in nonfiction should be reconsidered. On the one hand, real authors create versions of themselves in their narratives and can take on values, beliefs, and identities that they do not actually represent or possess. On the other hand, real authors, just as implied authors, can be inconsistent; inconsistencies may extend to the author's attempt to take on values and properties he does not really hold (see Phelan 2005: 46-47).

Biography”) and *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man* (“An Interpretive Biography”) deal not just with people who are already dead but with people who have become legendary figures, being in themselves suitable “characters” for novelistic biographies. Mailer’s “biographical” works, indeed, display the private mythologies and philosophies developed in Mailer’s fiction. In demonstrating this, I shall take into account the ways in which Mailer constructs various artists as his heroes or heroines – Marilyn Monroe, Pablo Picasso, Henry Miller (*Genius and Lust*), and Muhammad Ali, a “creative artist” of the boxing ring (*The Fight*).

Biography as a Novel: From *Marilyn* to *Picasso*

Mailer’s biographical works are “meta-biographies” in that they discuss their materials and their narrative devices, exploring their own generic status through metacommentary. According to Alan Shelston, “with biography, as with any other literary form, it is only by close investigation of the individual work that one can begin to understand the processes that go into its creation” (1977: 15; cf. Carrard 1997: 288). Ira Nadel suggests that “whatever role the biographer consciously chooses, his or her presence in the text is inescapable through the tropes, narrative style, and language of the work,” and “this reveals the essential secret of the enterprise: that the *biography is essentially self-reflexive*” (1988: 25; my emphasis). Among the challenges that the biographer faces and may explicitly reflect on are the limitations and constraints of the chosen form (see Salwak 1996: ix). In Mailer’s work of the 1970s – his most *non-fictional* era, a decade when he published no “pure” fiction – his self-reflexivity extends not only to his current literary techniques and nonfictional practices but also to his earlier ones. This is a decade that marks Mailer’s “biographical” interest, but also contains his ventures into art and literary criticism.

As Robert Merrill suggests, *The Prisoner of Sex* and *Marilyn* are artistically related: “[e]ach represents Mailer’s attempt to find a different use for those nonfictional techniques he developed during the 1960s” (1992: 139). *Marilyn* (1973) displays some new traits in Mailer’s poetics of nonfiction, for the narrative aims at being something else than simply ‘fact’ or ‘fiction,’ least of all another assemblage of ‘factoids’ of Marilyn Monroe’s life. For Mailer, “the question is whether a person can be comprehended by the facts of the life,” since facts “always attract polar facts” (M 18). A formative principle of *Marilyn* is Mailer’s belief that a life of a certain complex and even mysterious character creates the conditions for a *literary* meaning as it fuels

the narrative line; conversely, only a 'literary' perception can even hope to "open" something in a mystery like this. When tracing Richard Nixon's complex, calculated ways of functioning through *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* and *St. George and the Godfather*, Mailer suggests that "to explain Nixon, nothing less than a new theory of personality can now suffice" (SGG 202). Similarly, he believes that Marilyn Monroe's numerous personalities make the biographical project problematic as a whole, suggesting that she may open "the entire problem of biography" and asking "whether a life like hers is not antipathetic to biographical tools" (M 18).⁴⁹

Marilyn is a two-sided "chronology" of Monroe's life, partly in words and partly in photographs, including "Pictures by the World's Foremost Photographers." There is an authorial attempt to make these parts (words and photos) "come together in the shape of an elusive search" for the complex personality of Marilyn. The book contains a chronological biography of Norma Jean Baker, who became Marilyn Monroe, in the form of a rather conventional life-narrative framed by an authorial reflexion on the techniques and problems of the biographical mode. Mailer employs various (metaphorically cinematic) "frames" and "scripts" in order to narrativize Marilyn's (or, rather, Norma Jean's) childhood, constructing it as a Dickensian "novel" or as a Hollywood "movie." As David Ellis suggests, popular literary biographies often employ conventions of nineteenth-century realist narrative, being modeled on Dickens, for example, and in this way giving novelistic flavor to the biographical mode (see 2000: 127). Instead of making fiction out of Marilyn's life, Mailer reflects upon how other biographies and 'factoids' (including those created by Marilyn herself) have made her childhood resemble a melodramatic narrative. On the one hand, Marilyn's early years represent "the classic American small town comedy" (M 27); on the other hand, Mailer frames her experiences in an orphanage with an allusion to a famous scene in *Oliver Twist*: "There is a moment when Norma Jean goes through the portals for the first time which tolls a bell as loudly as any sentimental event since Charles Dickens wrote, 'Please, sir, can I have some more?'" (M 35).⁵⁰ Even stronger frames are provided by Mailer's own mythology, which makes Marilyn one of those

⁴⁹ In Nadel's words, "the desire of biography to deliver an enclosed self is actually a myth about biography that must be dispelled," even though "the illusion of unity is always experienced by the reader and biographer" (1984: 180-181). Cf. also Keener: "A good many of our modern historical figures possess not a single, inert persona, but a variegated, kinetic one. In these people, and in the biographical narratives that construct them, identity is dynamic" (2001: 2).

⁵⁰ In an interview, Mailer speaks about Marilyn as a typically Dickensian character, almost as if created by that novelist: "I think he [Dickens] would be absolutely fascinated

“exceptional people,” like artists and heroes, who have a fragmented identity or two personalities within them, and who may become schizophrenics or narcissists.

As Mailer believes, Marilyn “was every man’s love affair with America,” an “angel” who “suggested sex might be difficult with others, but ice cream with her” (M 15).⁵¹ Marilyn, for Mailer, was a “magnified mirror of ourselves” (M 17), for she promised that dreams would be fulfilled – and still she, the embodiment of the American Dream, was betrayed by that dream (cf. Girgus 1984: 138). In Mailer’s mythical scheme, her death represents the death of American romance and the last days of the silver screen, since “the last angel of cinema” “was never for TV” (M 16). If Lee Harvey Oswald, in the conclusion of *Oswald’s Tale*, becomes “Our First Ghost” (OT 784), Marilyn remains “the First Lady of American ghosts” (M 242). It can be argued that Marilyn Monroe is the first truly complex female character in Mailer’s work, later surpassed by the extraordinary Nicole Baker in *The Executioner’s Song*. According to Jessica Gerson, until *Marilyn* “Mailer did not create any female characters of genuine depth and importance” (1986 [1982]: 170; my emphasis). It is, of course, open to discussion in what way Mailer’s Marilyn is a “creation.” A fundamental difference between historical persons like Marilyn Monroe and purely fictional creations by Mailer should be recognized. Mailer’s book is not a fictionalization of Marilyn’s life, in the style of Joyce Carol Oates’s novel *Blonde*, which announces itself to be a work of fiction through its paratextual signs and which employs various narrative modes for presenting its main character’s consciousness.⁵² In any case, we may regard Gerson’s comparison between the character “created” in *Marilyn* and the most positive female characters of Mailer’s

with her. She’s practically out of one of his books: grows up in an orphan asylum and ends up being prime minister of England” (Lennon [ed.] 1988: 206). The end of *Marilyn* envisions Marilyn Monroe in heaven: “And if there is a wish, pay your visit to Mr. Dickens. For he, like many another literary man, is bound to adore you, fatherless child” (M 248). As mentioned above, *An American Dream* imaginatively also places Marilyn in heaven.

⁵¹ The very beginning of *Marilyn* is filled with metaphors suggesting Marilyn’s “sweetness”: “the sugar of sex,” “the full promise of future sweets,” “like a sweet peach,” “a chocolate box for Valentine’s day,” “sex was, yes, ice cream to her” (M 15). These sweet dreams foil out the shock when “the angel died of an overdose,” possibly committing “suicide by barbiturates” (M 15).

⁵² Another fictionalization of Marilyn’s life is represented by Mailer’s subsequent *Of Women and Their Elegance* (1980), a somewhat trivial experiment in the invented mode of “imaginary memoir” and told from the viewpoint of Marilyn herself. The difference from Mailer’s biography seems to be clear already on the level of narration, since as a character-narrator Marilyn “knows” things that no one else knows about the “real person”: “Now, my thoughts would start. It was like an orchestra tuning up. Stories

novels, Elena Esposito in *The Deer Park* and Cherry in *An American Dream*. These are beautiful and creative even though also troubled women, involved in performative arts just like Marilyn.⁵³ Yet Marilyn, “Mailer’s first fully-developed heroine,” is “more complex,” since she is a dialectical combination of the positive and negative principles of Mailer’s Jewish mysticism, both the angel and the bitch, or the beauty and the beast (see Gerson 1986 [1982]: 172).⁵⁴ The very complexities of Marilyn’s personae become reflected in Mailer’s attempt to find a new kind of biographical mode, just like the writer himself has to take his position not only as a novelist but as a “psychohistorian” (M 19). When facing “the complexity of the original character” (M 22), Mailer needs to reflect that no biography can ever hope to reach the person in full.⁵⁵

In a sense, *Marilyn* is a “novel” biography searching for its character and its form, thus resembling Mailer’s later narratives about Oswald and Picasso. According to Carl Rollyson, “Mailer’s ambition, then, is to investigate the elusiveness of his subject and the ambiguities of his own work as a biographer by viewing both in terms of his creative role as a novelist” (1991: 255). In *Marilyn* Mailer states that the questions of truthfulness and reality are always elusive in Marilyn’s case, and this is partly because of her playing of various roles in her life and partly because her biography is largely based on *factoids*, “that is, facts which have no existence before ap-

would begin to go through my head, that is, memories of things that had happened to me” (WTE 131).

⁵³ As Rojack watches Cherry’s performance as a night-club singer, the “champagne light” makes her “look like Grace Kelly,” and a pale green gives her “a little of Monroe” (AD 97). Elena, on the other hand, is figured (by Sergius) as an ambitious, “bohemian” girl training to be a serious actress in the male-dominated movie world. In fact, there is an allusion to *The Deer Park* in *Marilyn* (involving a comparison between Marilyn and Elena): “It is a love affair not unreminiscent of Henry Higgins and Eliza Doolittle, or Charles Francis Eitel and Elena Esposito, except that the passion is on Marilyn’s side” (M 74-75). For Elena’s exceptionally realistic portrayal in the Mailer canon, see Bufithis (1978: 50-51).

⁵⁴ In his essay-interview “Like a Lady” (1994), Mailer tries to reconstruct Madonna as a new (postmodern) Marilyn, just like Madonna herself has attempted to do. Mailer’s tentative approach to Madonna even echoes his analysis of Marilyn’s “narcissism”: “There is nothing comparable to living with a phenomenon when the phenomenon is you and you observe yourself with a cool intelligence, your own, and yet are trapped in the cruelest pit of the narcissist – you not only are more interested in yourself than in anyone else alive, but suffer from the likely suspicion that this may be justified” (TOT 1114). In the course of the article, Mailer makes his comparison between Marilyn and Madonna explicit (TOT 1133), and concludes by reflecting on his writing and addressing Madonna that “the theme of this piece” is that “you are a great artist” (TOT 1134). However, it seems that this essay, reprinted in the collection *The Time of Our Time* as “Madonna,” is only a pale version of *Marilyn* (as Madonna, for some, is only a pale version of Marilyn).

⁵⁵ Here Mailer quotes Virginia Woolf: “A biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many as one thousand” (M 18).

pearing in a magazine or newspaper, creations which are not so much lies as a product to manipulate emotion in the Silent Majority" (M 18). The author further reflects that "it is not always easy to know if we are telling the truth," and when facing this complex "mat of factoids," one has to select the most plausible "scripts" in order to tell the story; therefore, some facts or factoids need to be forgotten, and "the narrative must touch fewer events if we are to follow her at all" (M 58, 60). Like Picasso in Mailer's subsequent book, *Marilyn* is an artist who creates her own myth and legend, but it is the task of a critical biographer to try to see through these created masks and constructed factoids. Therefore, Mailer proposes his own "novelistic" approach to Marilyn's mysterious personality:

It is possible there is no instrument more ready to capture the elusive quality of her nature than a novel. [...] Since [the book] would rely in the main on the sources, it could hardly be more than a long biographical article – nonetheless, a species of novel ready to play by the rules of the biography. [...] At the end, if successful, [the author] would have offered a literary hypothesis of a possible Marilyn Monroe who might actually have lived and fit most of the facts available. [...] It satisfied his fundamental idea that acquisition of knowledge for a literary man was best achieved in those imaginative acts of appropriation picked up by the disciplined exercise of one's skill. (M 20)

Here it is suggested that the novelistic form itself, its complexity and its imaginative reach, may be the only way to approach a character as "elusive" as Marilyn Monroe.⁵⁶ Instead of believing in any fixed truthfulness in this kind of approach, Mailer sees this "species of novel" playing "with the rules of the biography" as a literary man's self-conscious experiment or performance which might succeed in producing a workable hypothesis about the actress.

What also makes Mailer's biographical attempt theoretically valuable, is its own "play" and "performance," its assumption that it (the book) is not a fixed object but a moving vision, a quest for various angles and frames – just as Mailer's *Picasso* biography is a self-consciously "Cubist" treatment of its main subject.⁵⁷ Mailer thus believes that a biography can resemble a novel or that a novel may be ready to play by the rules of a biography. These rules

⁵⁶ On the other hand, when discussing sex as "the most special form of human communication," Mailer wants to stress that "we are talking of a sex queen, so let us force-feed *sociology* no more," for "it is simpler to make the *novelistic assumption* that she [Marilyn] probably had a sex life of some promiscuity in this period" (M 78; my emphases).

⁵⁷ In the "Acknowledgment" section of *Marilyn* Mailer writes: "Perhaps one must finally acknowledge that all of this work has brought us to the point where we can recognize that a corner of biography is no more simple to put into perspective than a warp in the matrix of lost space-time" (M 262).

mean that “no items should be made up and evidence would be provided when facts were moot” and that “speculation *had* to be underlined” (M 20). Yet, when writing the “novel biography,” the author “would often be quick to imagine the interior of many a closed and silent life, and with the sanction of a novelist was going to look into the unspoken impulses of his real characters” (M 20). While there is a distinction between “the novelist’s freedom” and “the biographer’s constraint” as regards especially the presentation of an inner life, there are still various biographical devices like “must-have” speculations which allow the biographers “to look inside their subject’s mind without thereby transforming him or her into an imaginary being” (Cohn 1999: 22, 27).⁵⁸ We may of course recall Cohn’s criticism of such “transgressive” borderline cases as “biographies that act like novels” (an implicit reference to Mailer’s practices), and her somewhat prejudiced unwillingness to regard these experiments as literary works of art.

At least on a tentative level Mailer is forming a new biographical poetics in *Marilyn*. This can also be grasped in his partial likening of biography to the novel. As it may be suggested, in the “postmodern” age biographies have taken on the imaginative qualities of the novel, whereas the novel has incorporated some of the fact-orientation of biography. According to Celia Wallhead’s diagnosis, “biography is in a state of still becoming, which coincides with aspects of the concept of the self, for ‘becoming’ is the way in which the self experiences itself” (2003: 292). In this sense, Mailer’s book, reflecting in its form the elusive and changing identity of its subject, can be regarded as a seminal postmodernist experiment with biography. However, *Marilyn* can hardly be called an “unmistakable achievement” (Bailey 1979: 140; cf. Dearborn 1999: 320-322). Rollyson, one of the defenders and admirers of *Marilyn* (and the writer of Monroe’s biography himself), sees that “[a]t every point in his novel biography Mailer takes pains to show how he had made up his narrative,” and “[i]n his search for pattern he is simultaneously working as a biographer and novelist” (1991: 255, 259). Mailer, for

⁵⁸ Philippe Carrard, partly on the basis of Cohn’s suggestions, proposes “the poetics and the epistemology of biography” which shows, among other things, “how textual strategies for depicting inner lives (also) constitute responses to [these] conflicting audience expectations” (1997: 288, 289). As Carrard notes, most readers actually *expect* a literary biography to describe the subjective experiences of its individual characters, but those same readers “are likely to challenge the ‘seriousness’ of that biography if it contains too many inside views that they perceive as illegitimate” (ibid.: 289). In his own biographical poetics Mailer is quite aware of these possibilities and limitations of the mode; for instance, *Marilyn* contains very few penetrations into its main subject’s mind. Mailer’s most typical device in this sense is to imagine Marilyn’s passionate exclamations in the mode of free indirect discourse: “*She will do well to discover the rest of her!* Perhaps she has never been so divided” (M 236; my emphasis).

his part, sees Marilyn in some way in himself and himself in Marilyn, and proceeds to suggest that only an artist can comprehend another artist.⁵⁹

In his anthology and interpretation of Henry Miller's work, *Genius and Lust* (1976), Mailer tries to find Miller's "style" noting that "to enter Miller's mind is to write like him" (GL 92). It has been suggested that much of the commentary in *Genius and Lust* is disguised autobiography, things "true enough for Miller, but even more accurate on Mailer himself" (Rollyson 1991: 279). Mailer "enters Miller's mind" through his writings, discussing in which sense the man is behind his work. Mailer's art and literary criticism – he has been considered both "a rather bad critic of novelists" (Bloom 1986: 5) and "a fine literary critic" (Godden 1990: 212) – appears to be quite the opposite of New Critical ideas. As already suggested in my analysis of *The Prisoner of Sex* (which also includes commentary on Miller's work), Mailer's treatment of literary works and their value is quite firmly attached to his understanding of the author, so that the style of the work is the style of its author. For Mailer, "style is character," and as he redefines this assumption in *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man*, "style, after all, is a revelation," and "whether good or bad, style reveals the character of the writer who is perceiving the subject" (PPYM xii). Here Mailer is referring to other writers and their approaches to Picasso (and implicitly to his own style as well), but the reflection also concerns the close relation between Picasso's artistic style and his complex personality. In a sense, Mailer's various works are "narcissistic" (in their constant self-reflexion and their focus on the writer's ego), and the theme of narcissism also links Mailer's artist biographies together. While the theme is more or less visible in both *Marilyn* and *Picasso*, it is in *Genius and Lust* that Mailer gives the more explicit description:

It is too simple to think of the narcissist as someone in love with himself. One can detest oneself intimately and still be a narcissist. What characterizes narcissism is the fundamental relation – it is with oneself. The same dialectical love and hate that mates feel for one another is experienced within the self. [...] To the degree, however, that narcissism is an affliction of the talented, the stakes are not small, and the victims are playing their own serious game in the midst of the scenarios. If one can only break out of the penitentiary of self-absorption, there are artistic wonders, conceivably, to achieve. (GL 185, 190)⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Referring to himself as "a man with a cabalistic turn of mind," Mailer notes that the letters in "Marilyn Monroe" would *almost* spell "Norman Mailer." Playing with anagrams, Mailer suggests such possibilities as "Marolem Mamroe" or "Morman Maeler" (see M 20).

⁶⁰ What aligns Mailer with the group of Monroe, Miller, and Picasso, is his quotation of this very passage in *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man* with a self-reflexive note "at the

As suggested above, Mailer's artistic biographies always tell the hidden story of their author as well. *Marilyn* and *Picasso* therefore represent biographical writing that displays traits of the writer; in other words, "what we can never escape, in any biography, is the biographer's presence" (Halperin 1996: 160). As it has been suggested in the case of the Picasso book, however, "because his own persona often stands in his line of vision, Mailer gets the picture only partly right" (Shattuck 1999: 208). In the very title of *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man* (1995) there is, of course, an allusion to Joyce's novel, which can be described as an individual's road and struggle towards art. Still, the aesthetic construction and the artistic process implied in it apparently distinguishes Joyce's semi-autobiographical novel from Mailer's Picasso biography. Joyce's *Portrait* is not only a portrait of Stephen but, on a deeper level, of Joyce himself, who creates his art through the writing of this book; Mailer's *Portrait* is more about Picasso than about Mailer, even though there might be found some intent to draw aesthetic-thematic links between the painter and the writer.⁶¹

Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man is characterized as "an interpretive biography." As Mailer puts it, "the desire to make Picasso as real as any good character in life or in art has been the *literary virtue* sought after here" (PPYM xii; my emphasis). Furthermore, Mailer's approach is, as mentioned above, a kind of "Cubist" reading of Picasso's many-sided and changing personality, for "[c]oming into a sense of Picasso's character calls for viewing him and his work from many an angle" (PPYM xii). The main subject in Mailer's Picasso biography is, actually, the artist and not the art, or to be more exact, Picasso's art is interpreted by Mailer through the artist's personality.⁶² On the other hand, Picasso's "language of painting," his "visual metaphors," display a sense of magical belief according to which pictures, like words, have an effect on the world of reality. This is

risk of quoting from myself – and indeed, in just this context! – I will offer the following passage from *Genius and Lust*, a book on Henry Miller" (PPYM 148).

⁶¹ As Mailer himself has noted, "the artist that I feel the greatest kinship with is Picasso" (see Ruas 1985: 36). Obviously, as Mary Dearborn suggests, the idea given here is that both artists "took similar approaches to their art, shifting styles and genres or media so as to develop new ways to apprehend reality" (1999: 422). Mailer also wishes to foreground his *physical* resemblance to Picasso; on the back cover of the first edition of his Picasso book there are two photos, including a portrait of Mailer as a young man.

⁶² In his review of *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man*, Roger Shattuck writes that "the novelist's imagination has discovered a possible, perhaps even plausible, biographical explanation for the wrenching shift visible along the central axis of *Les Demoiselles*" (1999: 204). This biographical explanation "confronts the question why, chronologically and compositionally, in the middle of *Les Demoiselles*, Picasso transformed its style by introducing African masks for the two figures on the right" (*ibid.*: 203). A possible answer points to Pablo and Fernand's failed attempt to adopt a child, and thus "the fright masks

Mailer's typical way of interpreting Picasso's art almost psychoanalytically through his childhood, where everything may seem magical (as the legend goes, Picasso's "first word was *piz*, for *lapiz*, a pencil" [PPYM 7]). Mailer analyzes Picasso's artistic representations (painting as a language) which always say something more or something else than they seem to. Thus, early on Picasso plays with visual metaphors (a mirror as a vagina) fully conscious that "his relatives were not about to separate an object from the word that signified it – a mirror was a mirror; what would it matter what it looked like?" (PPYM 20). Developing his art, Picasso enters the world of "visual equivalents," as Mailer sees it:

Form is also a language, and so it is legitimate to cite visual puns – that is, visual equivalents, and visual exchanges. No matter how one chooses to phrase it, artists, for centuries, have been painting specific objects, only to discover that they also look like something else. A flower's petals in the sardonic view of Picasso at the age of seventy-three (by which time he trusted nothing in man, cosmos, or nature) could as easily be perceived as a cluster of grasping hands. (PPYM 58-59)

It appears that Mailer's interpretation of Picasso and his art is influenced by the same sources of magic and mysticism as *The Fight* and *Ancient Evenings*: Picasso's work represents "shamanism," "an occult act," and "some primitive belief that magic is a presence in all artwork" (PPYM 164-165). Mailer's colorful representation of the bohemian world of Montmartre at the beginning of the twentieth century is filled with topics and themes that appear to be characteristically Mailerian, including the appeal to magic and the occult in the circle of Max Jacob and Apollinaire.

According to Mailer, what is "magical" in art and life is something that cannot be fixed and fully explained, but which keeps changing and growing. On this basis, Mailer gives one of his own artistic creeds, partly influenced by Picasso:

Repetition can also kill the soul, and so a ceremony, a person, or an object is able to enrich us only when its nature, its artful nature, rewards further study or calls for more relationship – that is to say, its nature transcends familiarity. And that, indeed, may be why good poetry is more magical than good prose – the message is more elusive, more compressed, and more responsive to sensuous study. (PPYM 167)

Like Marilyn Monroe, Pablo Picasso appears as a typically "Mailerian" character, or is constructed as such. Thus Picasso "had a profoundly divided nature, but it was the saving mark of his wit to proceed in opposed direc-

in the painting will exorcise the failed attempt at adoption" (ibid.). This is, it seems to me, a typical Mailerian explanation.

tions at once” (PPYM 13). What is especially characteristic of Mailer in his interpretation of Picasso’s character and art is the speculation that “his artistic insights were leading him into more and more dangerous discoveries” and the wondering what if “he proved not brave enough to become the artist he wished to be?” (PPYM 70-71). This is, of course, the core of Mailer’s own mythology, according to which a person must take the dangerous route of creating a new self or else “remain the same.” In *The Deer Park* Sergius O’Shaughnessy must develop and “grow” both as a writer and as a human being as his failed artist-mentor Eitel tells him: “[T]here was that law of life so cruel and so just which demanded that one must grow or else pay more for remaining the same” (DP 300). In his nonfiction Mailer also figures, frames, and partly even forges real-life characters in the context and framework of his own idiosyncratic blend of mysticism and existentialism, with the Kierkegaardian creative and risky “leap” into the unknown at its core.⁶³ A typical “Mailerian” artist-hero is, then, one with enough courage, strength, and imagination to act, to cross a new frontier and go beyond, and thus create himself anew. It appears that, as an artist, Picasso is the ideal character for Mailer, “the genius of us all” (PPYM 352).

The Art of Fighting/The Art of Writing: *The Fight*⁶⁴

Mailer’s mythical approach to artists and heroes is powerfully realized in *The Fight* (1975), a narrative which deals with the legendary “Rumble in the Jungle,” the 1974 heavyweight championship bout between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in Mobutu’s totalitarian Zaïre.⁶⁵ Mailer’s documentary account of the boxing match may be regarded as one of the classics of sports literature, but the book also offers a more poetic and mystical take on the themes of writing and fighting.⁶⁶ On the basis of its factual material

⁶³ In “The White Negro” Mailer asserts that “to be a *real* existentialist (Sartre admittedly to the contrary) one must be religious, one must have one’s sense of the “*purpose*” – whatever the purpose may be – but a life which is directed by one’s faith in the necessity of action is a life committed to the notion that the substratum of existence is the search, the end meaningful but mysterious” (AM 306-307; my emphases). Mailer seems to be insisting that our moral action is predicated on Kierkegaardian uncertainty (see Whalen-Bridge 1998: 118).

⁶⁴ This chapter is based on an earlier essay of mine (Lehtimäki 2004).

⁶⁵ The event has also been depicted in Leon Gast’s acclaimed documentary film *When We Were Kings* (1996), in which Mailer appears as one of the commentators giving an account very similar to that in *The Fight*. For another version of the fight, see George Plimpton’s book *The Shadow Box* (1977), which includes scenes of Mailer’s participation in the event.

⁶⁶ According to Carl Rollyson, “*The Fight* may well be the most enjoyable book Norman Mailer will ever write,” for “it contains all the virtues and none of the vices of his best work” (1991: 264); and in Mary Dearborn’s words, “*The Fight* is a small masterpiece in the Mailer oeuvre” (1999: 329). In fact, the modest length of *The Fight* is partly

the book constructs intertextual and self-reflexive play: as boxers have to meet each other in the ring, and sometimes develop new devices in order to survive, writers try to renew previous literary figurations when facing their influential predecessors. It may be argued that this seemingly simple narrative (perhaps in combination with *Marilyn*) marks a watershed in the author's *oeuvre*, illuminating as it does Mailer's artistic transformation from a realist to a kind of mytho-poet with a growing interest in mysticism. In this sense *The Fight* represents Mailer's own experimental "sparring" before undertaking the biggest imaginative project of his career in *Ancient Evenings*.

The Fight can also be seen as a book-length development from Mailer's earlier essayistic accounts of boxing matches, especially "Ten Thousand Words a Minute" and "King of the Hill."⁶⁷ In "Ten Thousand Words a Minute" Mailer, disguised as a reporter, transforms the shrunken dimensions of the inept Liston-Patterson match into a mythical vision. He does so through his obsessively Manichean patterns of "good" and "evil"⁶⁸:

To shake the hand of the Devil must quiver the hole: who knew any longer where Right was Left or who was Good and how Evil had hid? For if Liston was the agent of the Devil, what a raid had been made on God, what a royal black man arisen. Sonny, the King of Hip, was Ace of Spades, and Patterson, ah, Patterson, was now an archetype of all which was underdog. [...] The first fight had been won by the man who knew the most about Evil; would the second reveal who had studied more of the Good? (PP 267)

As Jennifer Bailey notes, in his description of the fight "Mailer seeks to establish a dramatic connection between this boxing match and the narrating reporter that attends the match, by stressing the power of Magic which he describes as an agent of both God and the Devil" (1979: 43).

accountable for the pleasure it gives; a few years earlier in *Of a Fire on the Moon* Mailer (as Aquarius) somewhat self-ironically notes that "give Aquarius a great heavyweight championship fight, and he would give you a two-volume work" (FM 105).

⁶⁷ On a still deeper subtextual level, we may find William Hazlitt's classical essay "The Fight" (1827), also depicting the writer's attempt to comprehend a boxing match. The fight observed by Hazlitt leads to an actual death (whereas in Mailer's book "death" has a central role on a figurative level); nevertheless, Hazlitt represents the death scene through "explicitly demonic imagery" characteristic of Mailer in his various essays on championship fights (see also Lehman 1997: 130).

⁶⁸ Mailer is, of course, a self-proclaimed Manichean, which is revealed in *The Fight* as he feels troubled when listening to Muhammad Ali's poetry: "It went on for a good number of lines, and finally ended with, 'The soul of truth is God,' an incontestable sentiment to a Jew, Christian, or Muslim, incontestable indeed to anyone but a Manichean like our interviewer" (F 14).

While focusing on Muhammad Ali at the height of his mythical status, *The Fight* also introduces a more “modest” Mailer as compared to his earlier avatars, someone who searches for a new, concentrated style in order to approach the physical presence of a god-like figure:

There is always a shock in seeing him again. Not live as in television but standing before you, looking his best. Then the World’s Greatest Athlete is in danger of being our most beautiful man, and the vocabulary of Camp is doomed to appear. Women draw an audible breath. Men look down. They are reminded again of their lack of worth. If Ali never opened his mouth to quiver the jellies of public opinion, he would still inspire love and hate. For he is the Prince of Heaven – so says the silence around his body when he is luminous. (F 3)

Already at the beginning of *The Fight*, the contradiction between Ali’s “luminous body” and his “sickly green” color (see F 3) provides the suspense and mystery: how could Ali match Foreman, who even hurts the heavy bag with his fists, making thunderous sounds with their demonic force: “Macbeth’s witches encountered Wagner’s gods on a spastic dawn” (F 50).⁶⁹ At least on the early pages of Mailer’s narrative the reader (like Mailer himself) is somewhat struck by the phenomenon that Ali is more interested in chanting his poetry than in preparing for the confrontation with the frighteningly forceful Foreman in a fight which, according to Ali, “will be the largest *eee*-vent in the history of the world” (F 64). These journalistic observations – Mailer being among the reporters in Ali’s press conference, identifying and personifying himself for the first time as “our interviewer” (F 14) – are developed into a central motif in the narrative. Pondering the problems of the “aesthetics” and “originality” of Ali’s poems, Mailer remains sceptical: “For Ali to compose a few words of real poetry would be equal to an intellectual throwing a good punch” (F 14). There is a profound thematic point here, and as the narrative progresses, Ali begins to mirror Mailer and vice versa; thus, the boxer’s wish to compose poetry reflects the writer’s fantasy of “throwing a punch.”

Mailer seems to construct Ali as a changing personality and as a reflector of creative imagination in human beings, as an “artist” who, in the ring, finally introduces “his grand theme” (F 185). As Ali himself declares,

⁶⁹ As Mailer remarks in his essay on the first Ali-Frazier fight, “King of the Hill” (1971): “Sooner or later, fight metaphors, like fight managers, go sentimental. They go military. But there is no choice here. Frazier was the human equivalent of a war machine. He had tremendous firepower” (EE 23). The imagery of *Macbeth* evoked in *The Fight* returns in the opening sentence of Mailer’s essay on George W. Bush: “Exeunt: lightning and thunder, shock and awe” (“The White Man Unburdened”; *The New York Review of Books* 50:12 [2003], 4, 6).

he is “an artist, a creator” (F 64). The vision of the boxer's creative art connects Ali with Mailer; the double theme of fighting as art / art as fighting is developed throughout *The Fight*. The narrative begins with Mailer's wondering about Ali's specific “style” and “art” (F 4), which now, however, seems undeveloped and not fully realized simply because Ali looks “bored” (F 6). However, it appears that Ali is not the only one to be “bored, sour, and congested”: there is a strong implication that ‘fighters’ and ‘writers’ (such as Ali and Mailer) resemble each other. Both have been “champions” in their separate arenas, but now both need to face new challenges and rise to them in order to survive. After having described Ali's lifeless sparring, Mailer himself “felt as if his soul had expired or, worse, slipped away” (F 37). As Carl Rollyson points out, “the match between Ali and Mailer is so perfect that Mailer does not even have to comment upon it,” for “they are both aging champs with self-reflexive styles designed to triumph over their faults and weaknesses” (1991: 269). The self-reflexivity of the narrative becomes highlighted in those parts where Ali's training for the fight and Mailer's preparation for the writing of the book go in parallel, as it were, and where each has to face depression, difficulties, and various anxieties.

It appears that *The Fight* is largely a book about *anxieties* and *influence* (these concepts are used in the actual text), and I do not think that Barbara Lounsberry overstates the case when reading Mailer's text as “a casebook in the anxiety of influence” (1990: 180).⁷⁰ Lounsberry's reference is, of course, to Harold Bloom's theory of poetry in *The Anxiety of Influence*, the theory of the often anxious and agonistic relations of the “belated” writer to his strong predecessor. As Bloom states the central argument of his thesis, poetic history “is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves” (1997 [1973]: 5).⁷¹ It seems incontestable that Mailer

⁷⁰ Lounsberry's reading (one of the few theoretical essays on *The Fight*) has exerted some influence on my own. However, I want to “swerve,” in a Bloomian fashion, away from some of its ideas, for instance, the statement that Mailer aims to “liberate” Hemingway who is “caged” and “imprisoned” like a lion in the zoo (see Lounsberry 1990: 174).

⁷¹ While Bloom's focus is on ‘modern’ (that is, post-Milnetic) poets, he implies that novelists also suffer the anxiety of influence. Thus, “any reader of *Advertisements for Myself* may enjoy the frantic dances of Norman Mailer as he strives to evade his own anxiety that it is, after all, Hemingway all the way” (Bloom 1997 [1973]: 28). As Bloom, however, envisions in a different context, Hemingway's influence upon Mailer may have had a “destructive nature,” for “Mailer is a phantasmagoric visionary who was found by the wrong literary father, Hemingway,” and this is because, among other things, “Hemingway's verbal economy is not possible for Mailer” (1986: 5). Mailer's “phantasmagoria” finds its most inventive realization in *Ancient Evenings*, whose vision

has suffered the anxiety produced, first, by “Papa” Hemingway’s strong literary and masculine ideal and, second, by his suicide; as Mailer feels in *The Fight*, “a reverberation of Hemingway’s end shivered its echo” (F 123). On the early pages of his book, Bloom figures “strong poets” who wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death. In this way, all *writing* becomes *fighting*, and the outcome may be either victorious or disastrous. In his *Map of Misreading*, Bloom sees a poet “as a man rebelling against being spoken to by a dead man (the precursor) outrageously more alive than himself” (1975: 19). The appropriately titled *The Fight* can be read as Mailer’s anxiety about the influence of Hemingway as the “dead father.”

Mailer’s narrative may also be read as a version of what Bloom calls *apophrades*, or “the return of the dead.” In Bloom’s vision the “belated” poet tries to “swerve” away from the great “father” figure and, through several different steps, finally achieve the imaginary ideal that “the later poet himself had written the precursor’s characteristic work” (1997 [1973]: 14-16). To imaginatively rewrite the precursor’s work amounts to a psychic defense mechanism against the knowledge that one is engaged only in rewriting. Mailer’s version of anxiety is complex and idiosyncratic in its own right, however, and needs not be directly associated with Bloom’s idiosyncratic theory which reads like a long Romantic poem in itself. In any case, Bloom’s “conflictual vision of the intertextual process,” concerning both “the desire to imitate the precursor’s poetry” and “the desire to be original” (Allen 2000: 134), offers a tentative basis for understanding Mailer’s *own* romantic-psychological struggle in *The Fight*. Mailer’s own poetics is actually based upon conflict, rebellion, and anxious battle, and he is, of course, notoriously famous for challenging his colleagues and contemporaries to an imaginative match in the literary “ring” or “arena.”⁷²

What is especially “Mailerian” in the composition of *The Fight* is that the problem of imaginative anxiety is first located in the fears and creativity of a great boxer. A boxer like Ali “will not live with anxiety like other men,” and “he cannot think of how much he can be hurt by another fighter,” because “then his imagination would not make him more creative but less – there is, after all, endless anxiety available to him” (F 16). For Mailer, the boxer (and

of one being “bumbuggered by one’s precursor” offers, according to Bloom, “a sublime new variant on the sorrows of literary influence” (1986 [1983]: 196).

⁷² As Paul Zweig suggests, “Mailer’s public personality has been that of a man endlessly picking a fight: prizefighting has been his image of what it feels like to be a writer” (1974: 250). A parodic version this phenomenon can be found in Max Apple’s short story “Inside Norman Mailer” in which Apple, a rookie in the literary arena, faces his “gentle master” Mailer in the metaphorical boxing ring. Written just after *The Fight*, Apple’s comical piece contains an allusion to that book: “Who do you think I am, Norm?”

ideally Ali) is a true existentialist, an artist-hero who can survive only by revealing the “genius” of balancing “on the edge of the impossible” (F 185). In his characteristic style, Mailer uses Ali and the fight as a metaphorical frame in order to communicate the ideas and beliefs that he finds crucial in life and art. He even suggests that a victory for Ali would also be a victory for *himself*:

It was as if contradictions fell away with a victory for Ali. That would be a triumph for everything which did not fit into the computer: for audacity, inventiveness, even art. If ever a fighter had been able to demonstrate that boxing was a twentieth century art, it must be Ali. It would certainly come off as a triumph for the powers of regeneration in an artist. What would be of more importance to Norman? (F 162)

On a concrete level, Ali needs to fight off anxiety about his powerful and fearsome opponent Foreman and then demonstrate through his style and art that he is the reborn Champion. For Mailer, Ali represents a figure of human change, creative imagination, and artistic exploration, an antithesis to the fixed, strongly masculine, and regressive binary system of George Foreman, who in the actual match “was becoming reminiscent of the computer Hal in 2001” (F 204). This opposition between “art” and “computer,” or between changing and fixed masculine identities, becomes crystallized in one of the most striking dialogues of the narrative, where the secret weapons of the boxers are revealed, and Ali begins his legendary chanting: “‘Yes, we’re going to dance,’ said Ali, ‘we’re going to dance and dance’” (F 171). It sounds as if Ali is “dancing” away his fears and anxieties, whereas Foreman’s message is clear: *tough guys don’t dance*.⁷³

“The fight,” however, is not only between Ali and Foreman but also between Mailer and Hemingway, as the narrative implies through its

Didn’t I travel half a world with no hope of writing a book about it to watch Ali lure George Foreman to the ropes” (Apple 1976: 57).

⁷³ The title of Mailer’s subsequent novel *Tough Guys Don’t Dance* can be read ironically, for it does not represent the novel’s ideology (whether the implied author’s values or Mailer’s personal ideology). Actually, it is Tim Madden’s aging, old-fashioned father who has one absolute, Hemingway-like code in his life, the rule that he wants his less “masculine” son to follow as well: “Tough guys don’t dance” (TGDD 116). However, Tim cannot find the actual sense and content of this “philosophy” or its relevance to contemporary life: “Did I miss some elusive principle on which his philosophy must crystallize?” (TGDD 116). According to Mailer’s scheme, the metaphor of “dancing” could be interpreted as a figure of change, development, and creativity in one’s life.

⁷⁴ Mailer has written about Hemingway in his various works beginning from *Advertisements for Myself* and culminating in *Of a Fire on the Moon*, which begins with the death of Hemingway and American romanticism. Interestingly, there are some remarks of Mailer given by Hemingway himself in the 1950s, showing hints of anxiety as well: “[He is] *probably the best postwar writer. He’s a psycho*, but the psycho part is

several side remarks to the main source of Mailer's own anxiety.⁷⁴ It may even be contended, more or less persuasively, that Mailer's self-conscious styles, colorful rhetoric, and changing personalities resemble those of Ali, whereas Hemingway's tough and clear vision of reality finds its equivalent in Foreman, whose methods are "silence and concentration" (F 49). The imaginative confrontation between "Norman" and "Ernest," as figured in *The Fight*, takes place on Hemingway's "home ground," in Africa. When returning to camp after his comical running scene with Ali on the banks of the Congo – the overweight novelist jogging with the World's Greatest Athlete! – the character Norman walks "through the forest, dark as Africa is ever supposed to be" (F 91).⁷⁵ Facing the possibility that "a lion's roar" may mean the end of his life, Norman begins to place himself in the American literary canon. Mailer's egotism and self-irony typically combine in his imaginative canonization of himself:

Once, sailing in Provincetown harbor on nothing larger than a Sailfish, he had passed a whale. [...] He had recognized at the moment that there was nothing he could do if the whale chose to swallow him with his boat. Yet he felt singularly cool. What a perfect way to go. His place in American literature would be forever secure. They would seat him at Melville's feet. Melville and Mailer, ah, the consanguinity of the M's and the L's – how critics would love Mailer's now discovered preoccupations (see Croft on the mountain in *The Naked and the Dead*) with Ahab's *Moby Dick*. Something of this tonic sangfroid was with him now. To be eaten by a lion on the banks of the Congo – who could fail to notice that it was Hemingway's own lion waiting down these years for the flesh of Ernest until an appropriate substitute had at last arrived? (F 92)

Melville's *Moby-Dick* is one of the central subtexts in Mailer's canon, an influence, as it were, not to be surpassed, but the actual whale that passed his boat was "frolicsome" and "charming"; nothing like the White Whale itself. Now it appears that "Hemingway's own lion" is equally artificial, for later Norman is told that the lion's roar came from the zoo nearby. In this way Mailer "creatively misreads" his strongest American predecessors Melville and Hemingway in order to create his own work. In this actual but

the most interesting thing about him. Chances are he won't be able to *throw another fit* like *The Naked and the Dead*. But if he does... *I better watch out!*" (quoted in Glenday 1995: 3; my emphases).

⁷⁵ Norman's walk under the African sky is filled with imagery that alludes to the end of "The Snows of Kilimanjaro." Compare, for instance, the beginnings of Hemingway's and Mailer's paragraphs: "*Just then* the hyena stopped whimpering in the night and started to make a strange, human, almost crying sound. The woman heard it and stirred uneasily" (Hemingway 1947 [1936]: 440; my emphasis); "*Just then*, he heard a lion roar. It was no small sound, more like a thunder, and it opened an unfolding wave of wrath across the sky

still symbolically rendered situation the confrontation with the imaginary lion (or the earlier whale) leads Mailer to face his precursors, the sources of his anxiety of influence.⁷⁶

While relating his figurative representation of the actual fight to Hemingway's nonfictional book about bullfighting, *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), Mailer also "creatively misreads" his influential forerunner. As Bloom sees the Romantic poet's agon with the Miltonic figure, "Life to him would be Death to me," Mailer transforms Hemingway's vision of death into his own proclamation of "more life" (see Bloom 1997: 32). Mailer's sharpest turn away from Hemingway happens at the same time as he is writing about Henry Miller in the seventies, first in *The Prisoner of Sex* and then in *Genius and Lust*, according to which "Miller had a message which gave more life than Hemingway" (GL 17). As it has been suggested, in *The Fight* Mailer tries in his anxious struggle with Hemingway's art to posit his own sense of life against Hemingway's sense of death (see Lounsberry 1990: 180). There are strong subtextual patterns working in Mailer's depiction of the actual match, where Hemingway's imagery of bullfighting is frequently employed. Mailer even divides the eight-round match into "acts" which are analogous to the acts of the bullfight, "the three acts in the tragedy of the bullfight" (Hemingway 1958 [1932]: 96). This tragedy begins with the bull's battle with the picadors and ends with the final kill, in a chapter entitled "The Executioner's Song."⁷⁷ Mailer figures Foreman, also trying to imagine Ali's perception, as "a dangerous bull" whose "gloves were out like horns" (F 179), while Ali "was now taking in the reactions of Foreman's head the way a bullfighter lines up a bull before going in over the horns for the kill" (F 202).

What perhaps most clearly connects Mailer's vision of boxing to Hemingway's picture of bullfighting is the two writers' sense of the *art* of the

and through the fields" (F 91; my emphasis). Hemingway's poetic imagery of death (with "locusts" and "darkness") is also echoed, albeit ironically, in Mailer's text.

⁷⁶ Compare Mailer's reflection on the unconscious level of literary influence and a certain anxiety it evokes when entering the writer's consciousness: "Literary influence remains endlessly curious. I happened to pick up *Moby-Dick*. I hadn't thought about Melville ten times in the last thirty years, but as soon as I read the first page, I realized my later style was formed by Melville, shaped by his love of long, rolling sentences full of inversions and reverses and paradoxes and ironies and exclamation points and dashes. Of course, to be as good as Melville – that's another matter" (SA 99-100). I will return to the stylistic and thematic links between Melville and Mailer in Chapter IV.

⁷⁷ In a poem by Mailer, entitled "The Executioner's Song," the speaker wants to "execute neatly" and "kill cleanly" and thus, ideally, come close to "the Lord's creation" (CC 162-163). In this context, we should also recall the title of Mailer's largest book of nonfiction, *The Executioner's Song*.

event, both of them constructing their heroes (Mailer's Ali, Hemingway's Belmonte) as graceful and beautiful artists dominating their craft and the arena. As the match continues, it takes its "formal pattern" (F 190) and "it appears designed by a choreographer" (F 191). While Foreman attacks in rage, Ali is "still graceful in every move" (F 204), developing throughout the match new, creative and dangerous devices (hitting with rare right-hand leads, backing himself into ropes and fighting from there), "demonstrating that what for other fighters is a weakness can be for him a strength" (F 191). In this way Ali resembles Hemingway's "great artist" Belmonte, "a genius, who could break the rules of bullfighting" (Hemingway 1958 [1932]: 70, 71; cf. Lounsberry 1990: 179). In his depiction of the match, "describing every blow, every nuance in the fighters' body movements" (Dearborn 1999: 332), Mailer produces "a literary equivalent" of Ali's metaphorical, dancing style (Rollyson 1991: 267). Mailer even shifts to slow motion in order to be able to verbalize every sense of the fight – "we are trying to watch with the fighters' sense of time" and so "our description of the fight may be longer to read than the fight itself" (F 188) – and records the climax of the match, an artful, almost sensitive knock-out composed by Ali, which gives Foreman "a wholly intimate escort to the floor" (F 208). After this the fight is over; *The Fight*, however, is not. As Mailer notes, "for reporters, the fight had just begun" (F 211).

Now Mailer has to begin contemplating his ways of writing this book, pondering his own style and studying transcripts and other textual evidence, eventually trying to catch that "reality [which] does not feel real," as he envisions Foreman's unfocused sense of the world after the match (F 215). Already from the beginning of the narrative, its deepest plot has obviously been the writing itself and the difficulties associated with it. In this sense, *The Fight* presents itself as a work in which one of the main subjects is its own process of production, and while the story betrays some traits of the picaresque adventure mode (depicting Mailer's comical adventures in Africa), it is also a narrative "concerned with continually reflecting the adventure of [its] own generation" (Dällenbach 1989 [1977]: 77). Similarly Jack Richardson, in his relatively early discussion of Mailer's nonfictional artistry and aesthetics, suggests that "the modern novel often deals with *the adventure of its own making* and [...] more than insinuates that its real hero is its creator" (1971 [1969]: 193-194). It becomes clear, throughout *The Fight*, that Mailer is figuring and interpreting his subject and his factual materials through specific lenses provided by various literary subtexts, Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon* being one of the main presences in the second part of the narrative.

We may recall that at the very beginning of the narrative Mailer envisions a certain sickness in Ali's look: "There is the sickly green of a depressed morning in the muddy washes of the flesh" (F 3). On a deeper figurative level this notion is associated by Mailer with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* where the dying are presented as "nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom" (Conrad 1995 [1900]: 35; F 23). Mailer's Zaïre is, of course, the former Belgian Congo and the very site of Conrad's "horror," now replaced by the new totalitarian-technological horror of Mobutu Sese Seko.⁷⁸ As Mailer writes, "it was a long way from Joseph Conrad and *the old horror*" (F 23; my emphasis), because if "Congo" represents something originally African, "Zaïre" ironically connotes the language of the former imperialists.⁷⁹ There is, then, a Conradian "greenish gloom" in the air as Mailer visits Africa and makes preliminary plans for the writing of "this book."⁸⁰ In the following, he is only able to accept in a self-ironic sense those definitions given of him by Ali and other fighters in Africa, like "No'min Million," "a great writer," "the champ among writers," and "a man of wisdom": "Now, our man of wisdom had a vice. He wrote about himself. Not only would he describe the events he saw, but his own small effect on events. This irritated critics. They spoke of ego trips and the unattractive dimensions of his narcissism" (F 31). The "new journalistic" practice of foregrounding the subjective reporter's

⁷⁸ In her book of literary journalism, *Salvador* (1983), Joan Didion constructs her real-life role as a reporter acting in a strange country. Because the author-narrator-reporter-character (autobiographically the same person) is in the midst of potentially dangerous events, this creates conditions for a specific reader-identification towards the text and its maker-protagonist: "By making a reader care about her narrator on the mimetic level Didion is following the conventions of latter-day New Journalism: realistic narrative that promotes reader identification" (Lehman 1997: 150). There are intertextual links between *Salvador* and Mailer's earlier *The Fight*, since both include the story of a reporter-character's "adventures" in a strange, exotic, and violent country. However, instead of only romanticizing or mystifying Central America and Central Africa, both writers consciously link the modern "horrors" of El Salvador and Zaïre to their imperialistic and colonialist heritage, also through allusions to *Heart of Darkness*.

⁷⁹ Mailer, somewhat nostalgically, even cites Vachel Lindsay's famous (if notoriously 'racist') poem "The Congo" with its hypnotic chant "THEN I SAW THE CONGO, CREEPING THROUGH THE BLACK, CUTTING THROUGH THE JUNGLE WITH A GOLDEN TRUCK" and its rhythmic "Rattle-rattle, rattle-rattle, Bing! Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, BOOM!" (Lindsay 1992 [1914]: 4; F 104). In a way, the sounds of Lindsay's poem are echoed in the much-used cheer of Ali's fans and even Ali himself: *Ali boma ye!*

⁸⁰ In a sense, even these reflections on the writing of the book work as allusions to *Death in the Afternoon*, which begins with Hemingway's pondering of his difficulties in approaching the complexities of bullfighting: "So I went to Spain to see bullfights and to try to write about them for myself" (Hemingway 1958 [1932]: 11).

vision of the event is reflected upon in Mailer's concern about the communication between the author-narrator and his reader-audience:

If he was now wondering what name he ought to use for his piece about the fight, it was out of no excess of literary ego. More, indeed, from concern for the reader's attention. It would hardly be congenial to follow a long piece of prose if the narrator appeared only as an abstraction: The Writer, The Traveler, The Interviewer. (F 31)

After adopting, finally, his first name for this piece, a more modest and intimate "Norman" rather than the self-conscious and loud "Mailer" of his previous nonfiction, the author-narrator begins to search for some applicable metaphorical framework for his account of the fight and of the African spirit. This is because without some crystallizing center "all this geographical, political, and historical sludge" (F 38) would collapse into sprawling notes. Incidentally, Norman finds a book called *Bantu Philosophy*, which appears to confirm his own long-held ideas that a man "would take his balance, his quivering place, in a field of all the forces of the living and the dead" (F 38). The basic idea that humans were "forces, not beings," becomes a hidden motif and an embedded story in *The Fight*: according to Bantu philosophy, one tried to live in the field of opposite forces in such a way as to increase one's own force, and one tried to "enrich the *muntu* which was the amount of life in oneself" (F 38-39). Bantu philosophy also teaches Norman something else, namely that words have their magic: "Nommo is at once the name of the word and the spirit of the water. So Nommo lives everywhere: in the vapor of the air and the pores of the earth. Since the word is equal to water, all things are effected by Nommo, the word" (F 40).

As Joseph Wenke writes, "Mailer is affirming a transcendentalist ontology and existential ethic: magic does indeed exist, and risktaking is life-sustaining and necessary to moral growth" (1987: 89). The idea of *karma* is visible and operative here – human beings are forces with previous and future existences.⁸¹ This sense of possible rebirth and the magic of words is further developed in *Ancient Evenings*, a novel influenced by Mailer's participating in the magical mystery tour provided by African mythology and philosophy. In Bloom's words, Mailer has gone back to ancient Egypt "in order to find the religious meaning of death, sex, and reincarnation, using an outrageous literalism, not metaphor," and thus "Mailer's dialectics of sex and death have found their inevitable context" (1986 [1983]: 193, 197).

⁸¹ In his previous work, *Marilyn*, Mailer tried to approach and explain his subject by suggesting that "the other root [of human behavior] may be attached to some *karmic* virtue or debt some of us (or all) acquired by our courage or failure in lives we have already lived" (M 23; my emphasis).

Based as it is partly on *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, Mailer's epic recreates the myth of Osiris, the god who was mutilated but resurrected from the dead (like Jesus, of course, who tells his own story in *The Gospel According to the Son*). The story begins with a dead narrator's slow and painful entry into a new consciousness (or, actually, it is "Ka," the surviving double of the dead): "Crude thoughts and fierce forces are my state. I do not know who I am. Nor what I was. I cannot hear a sound" (AE 3). In the course of the long narrative, we may follow this narrator's rebirth through imagination, first through his acquaintance with magic and finally through his belief in the importance of creating both his own self and the history of the lost world through writing: "By this I am told that I must enter into *the power of the word*" (AE 709; my emphasis). Before his final ascension, the narrator tells how he "mounted on this ladder of lights to that place in heavens where one might gaze like Osiris upon the portents of all that is ahead" (AE 708), and in the symbolism of ancient Egypt it is the ladder which represents the transition from the material world onto a higher level of awareness and spiritual wisdom.

The Fight and *Ancient Evenings* are both stories of the writer's rebirth, transformation, metamorphosis. According to Mark Edmundson's interpretation of Bloom's theory, "male poets engage in symbolic parricide to bring themselves to painful birth" (1995: 200). The structural movement in *Ancient Evenings* proceeds from the first book, "The Book of One Man Dead," to the last book, "The Book of Secrets," while in *The Fight* there is the division between Part I, "The Dead Are Dying of Thirst," and Part II, "N'golo." The movement in either case is from being "dead" to a spiritual and imaginative rebirth.⁸² This becomes clear in Mailer's discussion of 'n'golo' in *The Fight*: "N'golo was a Congolese word for force, for vital force. Equally it would be applied to ego, status, strength or libido. [...] the dead have no n'golo. The dead are dying of thirst – so goes an old African saying" (F 75). Thus the juxtaposition and distinction between being dead and being alive is laid bare and thematized in the very structure of the book. However, instead of remaining only an abstract model, this vision receives

⁸² In fact, we may regard this kind of movement as a central motif, or "thematic dominant," in Mailer's work. It is already present in his first novel *The Naked and the Dead* where the title is associated with Nietzsche's "plants and phantoms" (ND 433) which was, in fact, the novel's original working title (see Lennon [ed.] 1988: 7). The idea that death is meaningful is central in Mailer's work; in *Cannibals and Christians* he speaks of "death as a continuation, a migration, a metamorphosis" (CC 325). In *An American Dream* Stephen Rojack (Professor of Existential Psychology also engaged in other, less academic activities) presents "the not inconsiderable thesis that magic, dread, and the perception of death were the roots of motivation" (AD 8).

its clarity and power through Mailer's focus on Ali, who seems to receive his *own* power from the African force (n'golo) and word (Nommo). Mailer actually notes that "never did a fighter seem to have so much respect for the magical power of the written word" (F 75). It is implied that in order to win the fight Ali must find his Nommo and n'golo, and the same goes for Mailer if he is to succeed in his attempt to write this book: he needs to find the power of the word, and his imaginative rebirth as a writer. One of Ali's "people," an allegedly illiterate man called Bundini, is figured as a character who creates the analogy between *the word* (Nommo) and Mailer's book. Part I of the narrative thus closes with the words "Long live Nommo, spirit of words" (F 138).

Apparently, there is some discrepancy between the belief in the magic of words – so that one word may mean many things simultaneously and still contain the whole world – and the actual, hard labor of literary production, which is usually devoid of magic, so that words never really reach their referent in empirical reality. What finally counts is Ali's own courage and creativity in the ring or, in an analogical way, Mailer's art and style of writing about the actual event. However, Mailer is not the only one in Africa who sees magical forces surrounding the championship event. The playful Bundini sees the fight as an allegory or a fairy-tale whose end is already determined:

Bundini could neither read nor write – so he claimed – but he could speak. It was rare for him to make a remark void of metaphor. On the Ali-Foreman fight he commented to the press, "God set it up this way. This is the closing of the book. The king gained his throne by killing a monster and the king will regain his throne by killing a bigger monster. *This is the closing of the book.*" (F 128-29; my emphasis)

Bundini interprets the fight as a book whose end is already known, so that this embedded allegory is proleptic in that it provides a "figural" explanation why Ali cannot lose even though the "facts" speak clearly for Foreman's victory. Of course, at this point of the narrative of *The Fight* – in the middle of the actual book – it is not clear whether Bundini's allegory will prove to be true. Bundini's belief that the match is already fixed in some mythological framework is recalled in Mailer's comment after the actual fight, ironically rendering the word 'fixed' in two different senses: "Back in America everybody was already yelling that the fight was fixed. Yes. So was *The Night Watch* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*" (F 210).⁸³

⁸³ In a similar spirit, Hemingway compares (in the Spanish context) Belmonte's and Joselito's art in the bullfighting ring with the work of Velázquez and Cervantes (see Hemingway 1958 [1932]: 74).

This notion further confirms the self-reflexive idea that the fight itself is a work of art especially as conducted through Ali's artistry in the ring. But to be exact, it is Mailer's book which "fixes" that actual event and its representations artistically, through literary making, representing Mailer's nonfictional poetics at its best.

This is the closing of Chapter II of my thesis. After constructing a basis for Mailer's narrative art, thematic, and mythology and after proposing various links between his fiction and nonfiction in this chapter, I now turn to my main case studies and suggest how they construct and represent Mailer's poetics of nonfiction.

Chapter III

The Filtered Vision: Author, Narrator, and Character in The Armies of the Night

In this chapter I argue that *The Armies of the Night* (1968), Mailer's central work of nonfiction, evolves a narrative poetics of its own, achieving an idiosyncratic structural complexity and literary form. As Robert Merrill claims, "the structure of *Armies* is unique" (1986 [1974]: 128) and the book represents "the most powerful synthesis of Mailer's artistic and prophetic ambitions" (1992: 107). According to Robert Alter, "*The Armies of the Night* is probably Mailer's most fully achieved book" (1984 [1970]: 60). As *Armies* makes explicit through its visual and spatial metaphors, the world of reality is always seen through a "filtered vision." Furthermore, the artistic devices that the *author-narrator* self-consciously employs (among them his ironic construction of "himself" as a novelistic *character*) direct and orient the *reader's* focusing on the formal, aesthetic, structural, and "novelistic" aspects of this by now classical nonfictional narrative.

Character and Narration

Norman Mailer as a Novelistic Character

Book One of *The Armies of the Night*, entitled "History as a Novel: The Steps of the Pentagon," describes the character Norman Mailer's involvement in the March on the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., in October 1967.

The narrative begins by presenting the “hero” of the story: “From the outset, let us bring you news of *your protagonist*” (AN 3; my emphasis). Here we can see a typical device of classical omniscient narration in the style of the eighteenth- or nineteenth-century novel, with an authorial voice (“us”) addressing the audience (“you”) and objectifying the hero. We may therefore distinguish the character Mailer’s “novelistic” position in the narrative which deliberately and self-consciously uses conventions of the classical novel, and where the author-narrator’s voice seemingly parodies “that of the old-fashioned Victorian narrator, intrusive, almost scholarly and pedantic” (Anderson 1987: 110). In this sense the very first sentence of the story – “let us bring you news of your protagonist” – not only designates and constitutes the distinction between the narrator and the narrated but also draws the reader to imagine the protagonist.¹

The quick turn which the narrative takes, however, is to present this protagonist, Norman Mailer, through an excerpt from an article in *Time* magazine which attempts to present the “hero” in a negative light.² As Joseph Wenke suggests, Mailer takes an “incredible comic risk” with this kind of opening (see 1987: 140), playing with his own authorial role and biographical person and making the latter a butt of self-irony. The page-long newspaper report from *Time* magazine represents typical attitudes towards the well-known writer’s public persona, as he performs his overblown routine in the Ambassador Theater in Washington just before the March on the

¹ Beginnings of novels have become an interesting topic for narrative studies, especially in the rhetorical tradition. James Phelan discusses beginnings as something that generates the progression of the narrative by introducing unstable relationships between characters or between authors/narrators and readers, while they also “invite readers to move from the world outside the novel to the world of the novel,” and “establish relationships among authors, narrators, and audiences” (1998: 97; see also Phelan 2003: 71-73). In Mailer’s nonfiction, beginnings are frequently somewhat striking and obscure, drawing the reader to react to the narrative world that is presented through the author-narrator’s voice. In addition to the swift beginning of *Armies*, let us contemplate the following: “They snipped the ribbon in 1915, they popped the cork, Miami Beach was born” (MSC 3); “Norman, born sign of Aquarius, had been in Mexico when the news came about Hemingway” (FM 3); “Greetings to Charles Dickens across the vales of Karma: it was the best and worst of conventions” (SGG 3); “There is always a shock in seeing him again” (F 3); “Brenda was six years old when she fell out of the apple tree” (ES 5); “When Valya was three years old she fell on a hot stove and burned her face” (OT 5). John Russell is surprisingly critical of these kinds of “deictic openings” in journalistic nonfiction, claiming that such “direct address” is “an easy method to choose for an irrelevancy” (2000: 18). Jonathan Culler, on the other hand, sees that “deictics with unknown references which occur at the beginnings of novels also contribute to a hermeneutic rhythm” (1975: 211). The famous opening sentence of Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, using the unreferenced pronoun “that,” goes even further than Mailer’s beginnings in its seeming irrelevancy (and in its downright obscurity, which I find consciously comical or parodic): “*That’s* good thinking there, Cool Breeze” (Wolfe 1999 [1968]: 5; my emphasis).

Pentagon: the “anti-star was author Norman Mailer,” “slurping liquor from a coffee mug,” “it was one of his few coherent sentences,” “mumbling and spewing obscenities as he staggered about the stage,” “Mailer managed to pronounce flawlessly his all-purpose noun, verb, and expletive: “**** you,”” “Mailer was perky enough to get himself arrested by two Marshals” (AN 3). Even though Mailer seems to have fun with the representations of his character in the news media, the starting point of the narrative is to give, in the following pages, a more detailed, complex, and possibly more truthful account of his experiences in Washington, where he participated in a demonstration against the Vietnam War.

As readers of Mailer’s works know very well, his critique of the false objectivity of conventional newspaper journalism is sometimes very harsh. After his subsequent arrest by the Military Police in the middle of the demonstration, Mailer draws attention to his own paranoia concerning the newspaper accounts of his arrest, making it explicit that “*this is all doubtless most paranoid of Mailer*, but then he had had nearly twenty years of *misreporting about himself*, and the seed of paranoia is the arrival of the conviction that *the truth about oneself is never told*” (AN 141; my emphases). So the author appears to be quite serious when, just after quoting the *Time* article, he states: “Now we may leave *Time* in order to find out what happened” (AN 4).³ The newspaper clipping not only anticipates, in its superficial and apparently misrepresenting way, the following events – which, in retrospect, have already happened – but also brings forth the question of language and style in the representation of complex reality. What is implied here becomes a more explicit metajournalistic commentary in the subsequent pages of *Armies*: the conclusion is that the practice of “objective” journalism, detaching itself from the core, subtlety, and complexity

² As Phelan describes the famous opening of *Tom Jones*, “its function is to introduce the implied author to the audience and, with its explicit, metaphorical comment on the role of the author, to facilitate real readers’ entrance into Fielding’s fictional world” (1998: 97).

³ Mary Dearborn, in her Mailer biography, refers to this actual case of *Time*’s description of Mailer in the Ambassador Theater which is reproduced in the book: “His old enemy *Time* ran an account of the evening that centered on his drinking, his obscenity, and his reference to missing the urinal. (Norman would preface his account with the clipping, getting the last word by saying, ‘Now we may leave *Time* in order to find out what happened’)” (1999: 238). Actually, Mailer gets his last word on this matter later in *Armies* when speaking of “that American audience brainwashed by Hollywood, TV, and *Time*” (AN 157). Perhaps the last word still belongs to the media, this time to “a *Washington Post* reporter, who, as the spiritual double of the *Time* magazine character assassin, rendered [Mailer’s] comment [about burning the body and blood of Christ in Vietnam] absurd by juxtaposing it with against the fact that ‘Mailer is a Jew’” (Wenke 1987: 160; see AN 215). On this, Mailer can only comment: “It was obvious the good novelist Norman Mailer had much to learn about newspapers, reporters, and salience” (AN 215).

of events, must be replaced with other textual means and practices. In a way Mailer's comment, "Now we may leave *Time* in order to find out what happened" also signifies his abandonment of one-dimensional, linear, time-bound, and putatively "factual" reportage and entering the speculative lights and spiral forms of novelistic representation.⁴

In his characteristically complex passages, Mailer is picturing his own mind, simultaneously showing that the nonfiction writer is an authority on his *own* mind. However, the self-consciously fictional or novelistic element here derives from the objectification of "Mailer" as a character:

Still, Mailer had a complex mind of sorts. Like a later generation which was to burn holes in their brain on Speed, he had given his own head the texture of a fine Swiss cheese. Years ago he had made all sorts of erosions in his intellectual firmament by consuming modestly promiscuous amounts of whiskey, marijuana, seconal, and benzedrine. It had given him the illusion that he was a genius, as indeed an entire generation of children would so come to see themselves a decade later out on celestial journeys of LSD. (AN 5)

While these self-critical and self-ironic comments pertain to the character Mailer, it may be obvious for the reader that they simultaneously tell something about the author-narrator as well. In a way, these comments bring together the different Mailers: the "narrativized" Mailer on the story level, the implied "Mailer" in the text (emerging through the voice and ideas of the author-narrator) and the real-life Mailer, the public persona and famous writer, to whom these sentences also obviously refer. However, as Mailer maintains, his transformation into a "comic hero" (AN 53) is a novelistic convention performed by the self-conscious writer who is, ultimately, "in command of a detachment classic in severity," for "he was a novelist" (AN 54). There is, then, a kind of estrangement device working here, for the author-narrator appears to be speaking of his former self as "another," sometimes emphasizing the "now" of narration on the level of discourse-time instead of identifying himself with his character-self in the story-time.

The character Norman Mailer takes different roles and positions in *The Armies of the Night*, making it explicit that his public personality is always an artificial construction, with versions such as "the Beast" (AN 30), "a poor man's version of Orson Welles" (AN 32), "Prince of Bourbon" (AN 33), "the Existentialist" (AN 40), "a vaudeville clown" (AN 43), a

⁴ Mailer's own view of life and reality is not based on the "rational" concept of linearity but on the more "mystical" concept of life as a spiral. As Joseph Tabbi suggests, the form of Mailer's life-narrative in the course of his career has been repetitive, circular, or rather spiral, continually ascending "by the energy of its own oppositional extremes" (1995: 19).

“burlesque” and “fatally vulgar” actor (AN 44), or President Lyndon B. Johnson’s “dwarf alter-ego” (AN 49). Later in the narrative, Mailer is “feeling like the people’s choice *between* Victor McLaglen and Harpo Marx” (AN 202; my emphasis), which is a good description of Mailer’s self-conscious play with the roles of an (artificial) Irish rough and a curly-haired Jewish comedian. Mailer plays with “his false Irish accent” (AN 37) when addressing his audience in the Ambassador Theater (with some hints of his own fictional character Sergius O’Shaughnessy), employs “his imitation of Marlon Brando’s voice from *The Wild One*” (AN 111), or is speaking “in his best Texas tones” (AN 50), which resemble the double-voiced discourse of D.J. in *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, the novel to which Mailer actually alludes here (see AN 51). As noted in Chapter I, Dwight Macdonald, a literary critic who participates in the event, comments on Mailer’s theatre performance as “some absolute *hybrid* between William Burroughs and Brendan Behan” (AN 64). Mailer sees himself inside literary frames, reflecting that “at his very worst he was at least still worthy of being a character in a novel by Balzac, win one day, lose the next, and do it with a boom! and baroque of style” (AN 18). These various roles and voices render Mailer’s character fluid and ambiguous, and it is not an accident that some people in the middle of the demonstration ask, “will *the real Norman Mailer* please stand up?” (AN 127; my emphasis).⁵

While Mailer’s own character is complex, *The Armies of the Night* contains “a gallery of sharply intimate verbal cartoons” (Foster 1968: 30). The book constructs a colorful collection of character sketches and memorable portraits, giving real-life characters both comic and symbolic dimensions. But as Wenke argues, “of greatest significance is Mailer’s ability to develop out of the character sketch a series of associations that reveal with lyrical brilliance the character of contemporary America itself” (1987: 153). Several characters work in a metaphoric and metonymic way, sometimes

⁵ Even this question is a self-conscious literary allusion; Mailer comments that it is “a reference to two photographs he had used on the jacket of *Why Are We in Vietnam?*” (AN 127). In fact, the documentary film made of Mailer’s participation in the event, directed by Dick Fontaine to BBC, was titled “Will the Real Norman Mailer Please Stand Up”; we may also note that Laura Adams’s 1974 collection of essays on Mailer bears the title *Will the Real Norman Mailer Please Stand Up?*. Obviously, *The Armies of the Night* plays with the idea that there is not one “real” Mailer but perhaps too many: “[A] warrior, presumptive general, ex-political candidate, embattled aging enfant terrible of the literary world, wise father of six children, radical intellectual, existential philosopher, hard-working author, champion of obscenity,” and so on, but there is “one personality he found absolutely insupportable – the nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn” (AN 134). Mailer’s “original” personality, a nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn, is thus buried, as it were, under various and conflicting self-creations and public postures, like that of the “bad boy” of American literature and media.

fulfilling even allegorical purposes, as in the “surrealistic, black comic” sketch of “the Vegas-crazed Grandma with orange hair,” through which figure “middle-American insanity is graphically portrayed” (ibid.: 154; see AN 151-152). *Armies* constructs its historical and political scene as an allegory of America itself, without losing its sense of the harsh actualities of the event of the March on the Pentagon. In any case, this demonstration led by the New Left, cultural intellectuals, and hippies was “a new style of revolution – revolution by theater and without a script” (AN 223). Mailer’s burlesque and colorful description of the hippie “troops” of the demonstration constructs the March on the Pentagon primarily through the images of popular culture, resulting in a “postmodernist” collapsing of boundaries between mythical and historical, imaginary and realistic, and popular and political, and producing an “incredible spectacle” (AN 93):

The hippies were there in great number, perambulating down the hill, many dressed like the legions of Sgt. Pepper’s Band, some were gotten up like Arab sheiks, or in Park Avenue doormen’s greatcoats, others like Rogers and Clark of the West, Wyatt Earp, Kit Carson, Daniel Boone in buckskin, some had grown moustaches to look like Have Gun, Will Travel – Paladin’s surrogate was here! – and wild Indians with feathers, a hippie gotten up like Batman, another like Claude Rains in *The Invisible Man* – his face wrapped up in a turban of bandages and he wore a black satin top hat. [...] One hippie may have been dressed like Charlie Chaplin; Buster Keaton and W.C. Fields could have come to the ball; there were Martians and Moon-men and a knight unhorsed who stalked about in the weight of real armor. [...] They had picked up their costumes where they could, in surplus stores, and Blow-your-mind shops, Digger free emporiums and psychedelic caches of Hindu junk. There were soldiers in Foreign Legion uniforms, and tropical bush jackets, San Quentin and Chino, California striped shirt and pants, British copies of Eisenhower jackets, hippies dressed like Turkish shepherds and Roman senators, gurus, and samurai in dirty smocks. They were close to being assembled from all the intersections *between history and the comic books, between legend and television, the Biblical archetypes and the movies.* (AN 91-92; my emphasis)

These “allegorical” troops proceed to “the most bizarre act,” which is “the ritual exorcism of the Pentagon” (Zavarzadeh 1976: 168). At the moment when the Pentagon would be raised three hundred feet and turned orange, the war in Vietnam would end. The chant of the exorcism, accompanied by sounds of triangle, cymbal, trumpet, and drums, speaks in the name of all possible gods from “sea-born Aphrodite” to Yahweh and from Dionysus to Isis, including the most psychedelic of them all, “in the name, in the name, in the name of the Tyrone Power Pound Cake Society in the Sky” (AN 121).

In truth, the real plot of the narrative of *The Armies of the Night* appears to be *character progression*, where Mailer will not, finally, “metamorphose

into a Beast” but transform into a politically active participant, who understands that it is crucial that he should write a reportage about what he saw and experienced. As Phelan argues, Mailer’s book represents a thematic character progression, where a comic, inept, and unreliable protagonist grows, in the course of the narrative, to be a more mature and intellectual character whose political opinions should be taken seriously.⁶ So this is, partly, a story of the “growth of Norman Mailer” – the subtitle of Laura Adams’s study *Existential Battles* (1976). We may see that Mailer feels both psychic and physical integration when finally making his big move, transgressing a military police line and entering the “enemy” land of the Pentagon, being almost like Caesar (whose third-person narrative device he employs), stoically, without resisting the arrest: “He felt his own age, forty-four, felt it as if he were finally one age, not seven, felt as if he were a solid embodiment of bone, muscle, flesh, and vested substance, rather than the will, heart, mind, and sentiment to be a man, as if he had arrived, as if this picayune arrest had been his Rubicon” (AN 138). By focusing on the theme of human progression and transformation, Phelan offers a visibly different, more “humanist” reading of *Armies* when compared to those “postmodernist” readings which emphasize the schizophrenic nature of both the text and its author-character. Wenke makes a related point about the narrative’s human aspects:

The reader is able to achieve an intimate identification with Mailer because, unlike most comic characters, he is not flat but instead possesses considerable depth. As the comic characteristics of Mailer unfold in the beginning of the book, the fullness of his flawed humanity likewise reveals itself. The result, as the comedy and sympathetic humanity grow together, is one of Norman Mailer’s most brilliant creations. (1987: 141)

One should add that at the end of the book the character Mailer has “grown” to share the position with Mailer the author.

In fiction studies there has traditionally been little room for the analysis of character.⁷ In Mailer’s nonfictional description of himself as a character

⁶ In Phelan’s scheme, *progression* refers to a narrative as a dynamic event that moves through time: “[S]uch movement is given shape and direction by the way in which an author introduces, complicates, and resolves (or fails to resolve) certain instabilities which are the developing focus of the authorial audience’s interest in the narrative” (1989: 15). He speaks of progression as the synthesis of the temporal unfolding of the narrative with the developing attitudes the audience is asked to take to that unfolding. According to Phelan’s reading, the narrative of Book One of *Armies* tells the story of Mailer’s alteration from the egotist to the more modest man who is transformed by the event, and in this way Mailer the character makes the passage from ignorance to knowledge (see *ibid.*: 195).

⁷ A relatively common notion has it that characters are “fabricated creatures made up from fantasy, imitation, memory: paper people, without flesh and blood” and that “the

a sense of “otherness” emerges, but this apparently schizophrenic division is not so much a mark of fragmentation (in identity or in world-view) as the possibility of seeing different and fluid personalities in oneself, held together by some authorial vision and textual organization.⁸ “Mailer” in *Armies* can be clearly distinguished from D.J., the narrator-protagonist of *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, whose “subjectivity remains split and self-contradictory, disrupting any position of wholeness or comfortable category in which the reader might rest” (Tabbi 1995: 72). This is also because D.J. is surely Mailer’s most *synthetic* personage, whose existence as a mimetic character is constantly problematized by suggesting that “he” might only be an electronic voice transmitting a message from some mysterious place. The character “Mailer” in *Armies* is one example of such narrative self-consciousness which is more than simply “role-playing” and which is able to evoke the sense of “what is definitely *other* without feeling the threat of disintegration” (Doody 1998: 98). Of course, this Mailer is much more than only a *textual* construction whose subjectivity functions as a tool for the author-narrator, because he is also, in a classic sense of autobiography, a round and complex *human* character, whose “adventures” receive our attention in the first part of the book. Wenke connects the somewhat hybrid figure of this comic character Mailer with “the hybrid form of the nonfiction novel.” Thus, while the character Mailer attempts “to discover a significant form of political protest and participate in a historic event of national importance,” there is also an implication that approaching this “mysterious event” requires a new kind of literary form (see Wenke 1987: 139). Mailer’s labor

character is not a human being, but it resembles one” (Bal 1997: 115; cf. O’Neill 1994: 49). In any case, different labels and concepts have been used in the discussion of literary characters: “There are round characters, flat characters, the stock character, the fool, the protagonist, the hero, main characters, minor characters, static characters, developing characters and so on” (Olsen 1978: 109). In *Armies*, the character Mailer obviously represents some of these, being both psychologically “round” and allegorically “flat,” while also “developing” according to Phelan’s reading of the character progression. Incidentally, the figures of “the fool, the protagonist, the hero” are used in Mailer’s narrative. For a more recent discussion of characterization, see Palmer (2004: 36-43).

⁸ Mas’ud Zavarzadeh refers to R.D. Laing’s suggestion that in contemporary reality “schizophrenia is not only a breakdown but also a breakthrough” and that this notion “shatters many of the protective distinctions, such as irrational/rational; appearance/reality; interior/exterior; fact/fiction, by which the boundaries of the self and the non-self have been traditionally defined” (1976: 17). Zavarzadeh actually emphasizes the divided nature of Mailer’s book, its author-character, and the America it depicts: the “narrational schizophrenia in *Armies* is in itself a direct acting out of the schizoid nature of the actualities in which Mailer is trapped” (ibid.: 130). In Zavarzadeh’s reading, *Armies* is “a ‘house of mirrors,’ as if there are always two persons surprised at each other’s vastly different existence” and in addition, “[t]he split self has its counterpart in the split nation” (ibid.: 161).

in “the aesthetic of the problem” – his self-reflexion upon the writing – is thus clearly connected to his dimensions as a character in the event (see AN 215; cf. Phelan 1989: 191). Not only is *Armies* divided into two parts, but Mailer himself also takes different roles; the distinction between the author-narrator and the character is highly visible, and there is some schizophrenic “intention” in the writer’s systematic reference to his autobiographical self in the third person.⁹

An Autobiography in the Third Person Mode

Formally, *The Armies of the Night* is a hybrid combining the features of autobiography, history, journalism, and the novel. Rather than simply blending them, the narrative reflects upon the difference between them, perhaps even their mutual exclusiveness. Some critics, such as Estelle Jelinek, see *Armies* as “an effort to combine history and autobiography” (1986: 179). Jelinek’s own, rather problematic theory of the tradition of women’s autobiographical writing take its hypothetical starting point in the thought that women and men write different kinds of autobiography. If we construct, as Jelinek does, a rather rigid distinction between men’s “linear” autobiography and women’s more “fragmented” and “spiral” traditions, we may always expect to see men’s writing following straight lines as opposed to women’s more complex structures. It is somehow ironic that Jelinek should compare Mailer’s *Armies* to his arch-enemy Kate Millett’s autobiography *Flying* (1974) and argue that Mailer’s book was Millett’s “forerunner” in its attempt to “destroy the line between the objective and subjective in nonfiction” (Jelinek 1986: 179). In a way, then, *Flying* resembles *Armies*, but Jelinek emphasizes a difference in terms of Mailer’s, as it were, more ‘masculine’ and Millett’s more ‘feminine’ narrative technique – “a wide disparity between Mailer’s ‘improvisational’ history and Millett’s free-associative narrative, [...] though the aim of the two writers – to fuse the personal and the historical – is similar” (ibid.). For Jelinek (and some others) Mailer’s experimental way of referring to himself in the third person may be a disturbing sign of masculine egotism, but it can as visibly be a sign of a “different” kind of men’s autobiographical writing, a more *spiral* mode in tune with Mailer’s own philosophy.

⁹ According to T.V. Reed, “our picture is complicated by the fact that the text is told in the third person, through a rather shadowy narrator-interpreter” and “that these two figures are both in some sense Norman Mailer creates a strange kind of self-reflection in the text” (1992: 95).

Autobiographical texts often contain conflicting claims about their own intent and status and discuss their “own” genre in both positive and negative terms.¹⁰ Mailer’s obsession with his own persona, reflected in his referring to himself as “he” rather than “I” is a grammatical sign of the impurity of his autobiographical writing. However, this practice also links him to the tradition represented by, for instance, Thackeray’s novel *Henry Esmond*, Pynchon’s short story “Entropy,” Henry Adams’ autobiographical *The Education of Henry Adams*, and even to an older tradition represented by Caesar’s *The Gallic Wars* (e.g., Stanzel 1984 [1979]: 101; Genette 1988 [1983]: 103, 106; McHale 1992: 277n).¹¹ As Mailer comments on his narrative technique,

[t]here is also the third person when used as a substitute for “I” – for one, the character named Norman Mailer in *The Armies of the Night*. Using the third person in this manner may be a special condition of the first person, but it is legitimate. There is a part of the ego that is superior to ourselves – that person who observes us carefully even as we’re doing bizarre things, that special persona, possessed of immaculate detachment. (SA 86)

As mentioned in Chapter II, Philippe Lejeune defines the special case of “third-person” autobiography by the formula $A = C \neq N$, which identifies the author with the character but distinguishes the author from the narrator. This makes Genette believe that third-person autobiography ought to be related to fiction rather than to factual narrative; however, as the case of Caesar (or Mailer) suggests, the author is “speaking conventionally (figuratively) of himself in the third person – and thus [...] here we have a homodiegetic and factual narrative of the type $A = N = C$ ” (Genette 1993 [1991]: 71; cf. 1988 [1983]: 106-107). There are, of course, some striking differences between the above-mentioned texts employing the same grammatical mode: Caesar is hardly showing any self-irony in his way of designating himself “another,” whereas in Thackeray’s classical novel the use of “he” mainly serves the purpose of distancing the “older” narrating self from the “younger” experiencing self, dramatizing “the contrast between the *vita activa* of Esmond the soldier with the *vita contemplativa* of Esmond the narrator” (Stanzel 1984 [1979]: 101). Apparently, the possible narrative ironies and distances in Mailer’s text further complicate the issue.

¹⁰ “[T]he mark of autobiography may delegitimize (as in, ‘this is not a novel, but an “autobiographical” novel’) or elevate (‘this is not merely an autobiography, but an epic’)” (Gilmore 1994: 7).

¹¹ In *Armies* (as in his subsequent nonfiction) Mailer’s use of the third-person can be regarded as a self-conscious novelistic device, an equally self-reflexive sign of schizophrénia both in culture and identity, and as a rhetorical mode in the style suggested by Jacques Dubois: “‘The *he* is an *I* kept at a distance”” (quoted in Stanzel 1984 [1979]: 99).

It has been proposed that in *Armies* “Mailer uses his own central consciousness as a narrator, participant, and commentator” (Byatt 2000: 101), but this “central consciousness” is quite difficult to pin down. John Hellmann notes:

As mock-epic hero and mock-epic stylist, Mailer dominates the event, presenting it through separate and highly self-conscious personae – Mailer as witnessing participant, Mailer as reflecting journalist, Mailer as omniscient historian – and from each of these perspectives playfully adopting and violating conventions. (1986: 54)

Distinguishing between his roles as the author-narrator and a character through third-person narration helps Mailer to distinguish between his more “controlled” authorial speculations and his more “chaotic” experiences as a participant in the events. Thus it becomes a problem of interpretation whether the character’s ideas and opinions correspond with those of the author.¹² As there was “general confusion” from the *character* Mailer’s participatory viewpoint in the middle of the actual events of the March on the Pentagon, the *author-narrator* Mailer notes that “a part of the novelist wished to take the cumulative rising memories of the last three days and *bring them whole, intact, in sum, as they stood now*” (AN 118; my emphasis). Mailer’s way of contemplating his writing in the authorial position occasionally resembles the character Mailer’s sometimes unsure and confused ruminations; thus there are sentences in *Armies* like: “[T]he connection eluded him. He must pursue it later. Something there. *But the rumination running down, we must quickly leave his thought*” (AN 155; my emphasis); or: “So *he was happy*, and it occurred to him that this clean sense of himself, with a skin of compassion at such rare moment for all – *yes*, even for noble Commissioner Scaife and the dour U.S. Attorneys, *no*, not quite them, not quite, but *go on*” (AN 213; my emphases); or: “[A]nd *so found himself* ready at last to write

¹² As seen in Chapter II, it is a commonplace in much Mailer criticism to read the character Mailer’s colorful rhetoric, obscene thoughts, conflicting actions, and idiosyncratic ideology as representing very directly the author Mailer’s stance. For example, many feminist and other ideological readings following Kate Millett find only one Mailer in *Armies* and therefore receive every sentence on a strictly referential level representing the real author’s ideas. This amounts to under-reading passages which imply two Mailers on different levels of the narrative, as in the following: “The super-hygiene of all this mental prophylaxis offended [Mailer] profoundly. [...] one defied such fate [onanism and homosexuality] by sweeping up the psychic profit which derived from the existential assertion of yourself – which was a way of saying that nobody was born a man; you earned manhood provided you were good enough, bold enough. [...] This most conservative and warlike credo could hardly have meaning to a scientific humanist like Goodman” (AN 24-25). The character’s subjective “filter” is here ironized and nuanced by what Chatman would call the author-narrator’s “slant.”

a most concise Short History, a veritable précis of a collective novel, *which here now*, in the remaining pages, will seek as History, *no*, rather as some Novel of History” (AN 216; my emphases). Of course, in the historical situation there was only one Mailer, but we still need to make the distinction between the actual production of the book and the more interesting literary-theoretical question, the dramatization and reflection of that production in the narrative text.

In *The Armies of the Night* Mailer appears to be both an “embodied” narrator-character with an “existential” motivation, functioning on a physical and emotional level, *and* a “distanced” authorial narrator outside the story, a “voice” whose motivation is literary-aesthetic rather than existential (see Stanzel 1984 [1979]: 93).¹³ There is actually a similar kind of existential plot and suspense at work in Mailer’s fiction, his novels that tell stories of the protagonists’ growth into the position of the narrator who is telling the story (see Chapter II). However, what distinguishes *The Armies of the Night* from *The Deer Park*, for example, is not only the fact that Sergius O’Shaughnessy is not the author of the latter but also a question of the simulation of “simultaneous” narration/action in *Armies* as compared to the more traditional temporal distance between the “younger” character-Sergius and the “older” narrator-Sergius. When speaking of “simultaneous” narration, Dorrit Cohn deals with examples where the temporal hiatus between the narrating and experiencing self is literally reduced to zero, so that “the moment of narration *is* the moment of experience, the narrating self *is* the experiencing self” (1999: 107). The physical and existential act of narration, or the sense of narration as action and “performance,” as expressed in *Armies*, comes close to the narrative style of *An American Dream*, where Stephen Rojack’s physical action and subjective focalization cannot always be clearly separated from his act of telling/writing and his external perception to the events. This means that “the narrating and experiencing self can hardly be distinguished, since the presentation is focused here almost entirely on the self in its Here and Now of experience” (Stanzel 1984 [1979]: 225). Here we may speak of a dual temporality implied by the *was-now* experience which becomes possible, for example, in autobiography; thus “the narrative fuses the perspective of the remembering self for whom the

¹³ However, this is not to suggest that there would be two distinct narrators in *Armies*, although this is Ann Banfield’s conclusion in her discussion of “narrators behind narrators.” Thus, for her, “the narrator becomes the third person of the free indirect style, like the ‘reporter’ in Norman Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night*” (1973: 36). As William Nelles comments, “there are no extra narrators created by ‘third-person’ narration – there is still one, and only one, extradiegetic narrator, whether ‘Mailer’ narrates his own story or has an anonymous narrator to do it” (1997: 58).

experience is past and the perspective of the remembered self, for whom it is present” (Adamson 2001: 95). While Franz Stanzel believes that “[t]he narrative motivation of an authorial narrator is literary-aesthetic, but never existential [as in the case of an embodied character-narrator]” (1984 [1979]: 98), the narrative of *Armies* foregrounds the existential act and performance both on the story-level of action and on the textual level of writing.

Mailer’s practice in the book is *nonfictional* in the sense that it resembles the narrative technique of a memoir, as analyzed by Leona Toker in the context of Russian *Gulag* narratives: “[t]he attitude of the memoirist as the *narrating voice*” may be “different from the attitude of the memoirist as the *focal character* of the text, the prisoner who has witnessed the events and situations described” (2000: 77). The complexity of the narrative requires reader’s imaginative participation in its different levels, sometimes simultaneously, as if taking part in merged “authorial” and “narrative” audiences. The self-conscious artificiality of this device (which reminds us of the fact that nonfictional narratives are ultimately artifacts, no less so than fictions) has to be taken into account instead of merely suggesting that readers are able to naturalize “unnatural” perspectives in narrative texts by using the basic cognitive frame of *reflecting* (see Fludernik 1996: 278). The reader of *Armies* is unable to take the ethically and aesthetically “easy” position provided by classical novelistic narration in which the reflector-character’s perception is often clearly separated from the attitudes of the “third-person” narrator-mediator outside the narrative world.

As Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan argues, modernist and postmodernist novels “theorize” representation and subjectivity through strategies of narration, sometimes problematizing attempts to distinguish between “narrating subject and narrated object, container and contained, outside and inside, higher and lower narrative levels” (1996: 26). Here we are coming close to paradoxical narrative structures and Möbius strip-like constructions (see also Chapter IV). We may see how the self-referentiality of Mailer’s book is based not only on its self-reflexive structure but on its self-portrait as well. As in Velázquez’s *Las meñinas*, we observe a portrait of the artist as a character inside his work doing his work. The canvas that the represented “Velázquez” is composing inside the actual canvas may or may not resemble that actual painting we are viewing, and similarly the “Mailer” in the narrative world of *Armies* may or may not be producing the text we are reading. In either case, “we observe the observer” (TOT xii): Velázquez gazing at his models in front of the represented canvas and Mailer observing the events of the demonstration on one level and starting to write the book on the other. Both Velázquez and Mailer are composing their self-por-

traits, but perhaps in a very self-reflexive way as suggested by Mieke Bal in her reflexive reading of *Las meñinas*. In a self-portrait, we see the artist representing himself as “another,” more or less foregrounding the distorted image of himself; thus, “the self-portrait hovers between self and other, challenging the distinction between the categories of first and third person as it challenges subjectivity and its illusion of wholeness” (Bal 1991: 271). In a sense, “third person” narrative is a realistic illusion, implying that the narrator’s voice disappears behind the narrative that tells itself, as it were. Therefore, Mailer’s way of telling about himself in the “third person” in *Armies* means both objectifying and representing oneself in an analogous way to Velázquez’s “objective” representation of “himself” in his painting, so as to study and reflect on one’s act of composition. When reflecting his narrative technique which aims “to study itself” and “to regard itself,” Mailer notes that “such egotism” actually “finds itself therefore at home in a *house of mirrors*” (AN 54; my emphasis). “Velázquez” as a character in *Las meñinas* is created visually, whereas “Mailer” as a character in *Armies* is created verbally, and whatever their obvious relationship to the actual persons, they are also structured components in the artists’ works. The represented figure (like the artist inside the painting) cannot be directly conflated with the actual artist who has produced this work. In Bal’s reading of a painting by Rembrandt, “the ‘clumsiness’ of the represented artist can itself be taken as a self-reflexive device,” and “although the painter is tiny, his canvas is huge, and although he has not done the work yet, he is already, as the subject he proposes himself to be, qualified to do it” (1991: 266, 281). In *Armies*, the sometimes comical character Mailer is in a metonymic relationship to the serious author Mailer, eventually “growing” to the position of the writer able to write this book.

History as a Novel/The Novel as History

Visuality and Focalization

The Armies of the Night is an example of a modernist literary work that derives its techniques from various spatio-visual experiments developed in visual narratives of the twentieth century. In the modernist period “new visual discourses, techniques, and technologies” have led “to the emergence of new, distinctly modernist kinds of observers and visual relationships”

(Jacobs 2001: 3). The metaphors of focus, filter, screen, mirror, lens, reflection, and window position Mailer's text in the modernist context, creating the sense of a complex, moving world seen and perceived through a subjective observer, a sense that is later explored by Mailer in *Of a Fire on the Moon* with its "Cubist" form and world-view. While the semiotic or narratological studies of the point of view or visibility of literary texts have traditionally focused on fictional narratives, it could be argued that nonfictional narratives like Mailer's *Armies* can be equally interesting and complex in this regard.

"Point of view" traditionally designates a literally visual orientation or perspective, physical vision and experience of seeing; in addition to optical denotation, the term "point of view" has cognitive, emotional, ideological, and other connotations. It is not only the character's mental and subjective experience which entails a point of view; we may also understand the narrator's discourse as carrying a viewpoint which emerges through his discourse, rhetoric, stance, attitude, and position. In Genette's classic formulation, "voice" and "point of view" are two separate categories: "[T]he question is *who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?* and the very different question *who is the narrator* – or, more simply, the question *who sees?* and the question *who speaks?*" (1980 [1972]: 186). *The Armies of the Night* serves as an example of a narrative text in which the character "sees" the story-world and the author-narrator "reports" it, for they are ontologically on different levels. As Seymour Chatman argues, the narrator is not present in the scene he is reporting, simply because he is "*a reporter, not an 'observer' of the story world in the sense of literally witnessing it*" (1990: 142).¹⁴ However, specific narrative texts form their own complexities and anomalies, and it is not clear whether we may connect the character Mailer's "observing" with the author-narrator Mailer's "reporting," or, on the other hand, if we can categorically distinguish between them in Genette's or Chatman's formalist sense. If we argue that the narrator has no access to the story-world (but remains on the outside level of the discourse), then he or she must use the character as a filter through which to present the story-world to the reader. In the case of *Armies*, Mailer in his position as author-narrator must use his character-self as his "eyes" in order to establish an effective illusion of witness-reporting. Ultimately, however,

¹⁴ In more recent narrative studies (not directly representing classical narratology), the reciprocal forms and functions of narrating and focalizing have been grappled with in more complex ways. While Phelan (2001: 51-66) discusses why and how narrators can be focalizers, observing the narrative world they report, Göran Nieragden constructs a typology of different narrator-focalizers; in his classification, Mailer's *Armies* "is narrated by a *witness-participant*" (2002: 686n).

he is also “pulling the strings of novelistic construction” (Hollowell 1977: 92), for whereas the author-narrator uses his character as a tool and vehicle, the character has no knowledge of the future identity of the author of the account of his experience. This play with novelistic conventions is both ironic and self-ironic, for we must remember that both the character and the author are “versions” of Mailer, as if two sides of the same coin and occasionally twisted together like the sides of a Möbius strip. Of course, there cannot be one without another: the author-narrator’s voice, his use of words, gives “life” to the character, whereas the author is only able to create his narrative on the basis of the actual experiences of the character who finally becomes the author. The modes of observing, filtering, reporting, and narrating seem to merge together, thus combining the ‘mimetic’ and ‘diegetic’ aspects of the narrative text and problematizing the strict formalist division between ‘story’ and ‘discourse.’¹⁵

One of the characteristic ironies of Mailer’s *Armies* is that it self-consciously follows the classical mode of (auto)biographical novel, still marking the distinction between author-narrator and character even though in this case (by contrast to fiction) they are actually the same person. As Manfred Jahn suggests, “a notorious difficulty is usually encountered when the *speak/see* distinction is applied to epistolary and homodiegetic narratives, in which narrator and ‘hero’ are, in a sense, the ‘same person’” (1996: 245). When Genette tests his theories on the basis of the autobiographical fiction of Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, he foregrounds the case of the first-person character-narrator emphasizing his present, more mature opinion and knowledge, in this way distinguishing his present position from his previous, “young and innocent” character role. Genette argues that “the only focalization that [the autobiographical narrator] has to respect is defined in connection with his past information as hero,” but that “this distinction is relevant only for the classical form of autobiographical narrative, where the narrating is subsequent enough to the events for the narrator’s information to differ appreciably from the hero’s” (1980 [1972]: 198-199). The spatio-temporal distance between Mailer as character and as author-narrator is not large (as compared, for example, with the many years separating the “young” and the “old” Pip in Dickens): in *Armies* we may occasionally feel that the character “merges” with the author in the writing

¹⁵ Phelan argues that Chatman and some other narratologists resist the idea that both characters and narrators can be focalizers mainly because that idea violates the supposedly “vital” distinction between story and discourse. In Phelan’s view, “narrators can – and do – perceive, can and do act as our *lenses* on the story world, without being physically present in it” (2005: 116; my emphasis).

of this book. There is a distinction between the effects of fiction and nonfiction here, as Chatman points out: “Even when the narrator takes pains to make it seem as if he were ‘right there,’ witnessing the things as they ‘really’ happened, all fictional narratives remain artifice, convention, produced illusion” (1990: 146). While I also consider *Armies*, like all literary nonfiction, to be an “artifice” with effects and illusions of its own, nonfiction does not reproduce the “make-believe” illusions of fiction. The reader of *Armies* may know that Mailer was “right there,” but – as Mailer himself makes clear – also know that he was hardly capable of witnessing the things and events as they *really* happened.

As the viewpoints of the two “Mailers” are on different levels, we need to distinguish, in Genette’s terms, between the character who sees and whose point of view orients the narrative perspective, and the narrator who speaks. Chatman, on the other hand, makes the distinction between the narrator’s “slant” and the character’s “filter” (disposing of “focalization” as an unhappy term): “I propose *slant* to name the narrator’s attitudes and other mental nuances appropriate to the report function of discourse, and *filter* to name the much wider range of mental activity experienced by characters in the story world – perceptions, cognitions, attitudes, emotions, memories, fantasies, and the like” (1990: 143).¹⁶ The question of point of view also seems to point to the intersection between film and literature, as some modern novelists have experimented with connecting the narrator’s eye or the character’s optical focus with the lens (and occasionally also the filter) of the camera. In *The Armies of the Night*, this connection appears to be foregrounded, especially because Mailer is in the middle of a “cinematic” experience, being filmed on the scene of action as well as discussing his own experiments as a film director, thus juxtaposing his literary work with his cinematic work.¹⁷ The March on the Pentagon as a whole is already a media spectacle: “Newsreel, still, and television cameras were clicking and rounding and

¹⁶ The metaphor of *filter* corresponds to the idea of ‘internal focalization’ in which the narrative world is presented (or filtered) through the perspective, optical vision and mental cognition of one of its characters (see Cohn 1999: 177). The device of “filtering” also belongs to the specific terminology of film studies, meaning that different (colored, obscuring, softening, etc.) filters in camera lenses deliberately modify visual perspectives (see Bordwell and Thompson 1993: 157 and *passim*). As suggested in this chapter, “filter” functions as a metaphor in an ideological sense as well, implying that complex reality must always be filtered. The use of filter (both in a concrete technical way and in a metaphorical sense) may first “obscure” things and objects and then show them in a new light, thus functioning as a kind of defamiliarization device.

¹⁷ Mailer wrote *Armies* while directing his first two feature films, *Wild 90* (1967) and *Beyond the Law* (1968). This extraliterary work is not only concretely alluded to in the book but obviously has a certain influence on the narrative’s “optic” and “visual” devices. Cinematic allusions pervade Mailer’s various works (including *The Deer Park* and

snapping and zooming” (AN 105); Mailer and other participants are before “hundreds of Leicas and Nikons and Exactas in the hands of professional photographers” (AN 106), walking “in this barrage of cameras, helicopters, TV cars, monitors, loudspeakers” (AN 113), and as Mailer is obliged to feel in the middle of this media event, “if his head was busted this day, let it be before the eyes of America’s TV viewers tonight” (AN 107). These allusions and reflections exemplify modernist practices with their conscious rendering of the visual elements in the verbal media (see Grishakova 2002: 545). In addition, as Zavarzadeh perceptively points out, there is in Mailer’s narrative “a split point of view similar to the strategic use of the split screen in films to represent contradictory impulses,” and this device “creates in the book a sub-text that effectively undercuts and negates the text” (1976: 160). We might even conclude that Mailer’s way of presenting “cinematic” devices and materials aims at negating the “purity” of a literary text in the age of the electronic media. Thus *The Armies of the Night* reflects both Mailer’s role as an object of a documentary film being made and his active involvement in making movies. It is one of the themes of *Armies* that a contemporary novelist is eventually doomed to fail in his attempt to capture the complex texture of reality; hence the issue of the ontological necessity of the novel in the age of film and television.¹⁸

Mailer’s subsequent *Of a Fire on the Moon* appears to be informed by the “Cubist” revolution in modernist art, seeing the fragmented reality from various viewpoints simultaneously, and therefore disposing of the illusion of one-dimensional mimesis traditionally connected with realistic or factual narratives. *The Armies of the Night*, for its part, points to a new form of a

Marilyn), and his novel preceding *Armies*, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* constructs a kind of postmodernist ontology where the narrator-protagonist’s experience of reality is almost totally mediated by such allusions: “Two waves of murder, human and animal, meet across the snow in charge as fantastic and beautiful as Alexander Nevsky” (WAWV 181). The most complete combination of verbal and visual text in the Mailer canon is effected in *Maidstone* (1971), which was published as a film and a book. On a more popular level, Mailer wrote a script for the television version of *The Executioner’s Song* (1982) to be directed by his colleague in the construction of the book, Lawrence Schiller. He himself directed *Tough Guys Don’t Dance* (1987), his first mainstream movie, based on his own novel. In addition to taking part in documentaries, Mailer has acted in feature films, most notably in Milos Forman’s *Ragtime* (1981) based on Doctorow’s novel. In Jean-Luc Godard’s *King Lear* (1987) Mailer basically plays himself, sitting and working in his Provincetown home.

¹⁸ There is, then, some irony – or perhaps, on some level, contradictoriness – in Mailer’s attempt at defending the value of poetry and literature *inside* a nonfictional text which is strongly influenced by various visual media. As Joseph Tabbi also suggests, Mailer’s or Don DeLillo’s documentary-novelistic constructions “depend on contemporary technologies, especially the media technologies that DeLillo and Mailer claim to write *against*” (1995: 184). In this sense, it is possible to argue, as Tabbi does, that

“novel” which is largely influenced by the filtered and mediated perspectives of film and television. Thus the author Mailer reflects through his character-self: “It must now be admitted – *the reader does well to expect a forthright shock* – that the Participant was not only a witness and actor in these proceedings, but was being photographed as well!” (AN 133; my emphasis).¹⁹ Mailer, of course, was a media celebrity marching in the front row with other “notables” in the demonstration; at the same time as he is acting on the scene, he is being filmed by others, for actually there is “a documentary film made of him for British television” (AN 133). Thus through his metonymical association of novelistic writing with cinematic practice Mailer also reflects upon those techniques of reality representation which have transformed the nature of nonfictional and other narratives. A few pages earlier, Mailer the author constructs a focalization technique in which Mailer the character feels “immediately much more alive – yes, bathed in air – and yet disembodied from himself, as if indeed he were *watching himself in a film where this action was taking place*” (AN 129; my emphasis). After the visual and optic perspective on the events provided by the metonymy of film technique, we are told that the character Mailer “looked into the mirror to see the lens of the camera on him” (AN 135) and that he, finally, “was seeing objects now with [a] kind of *filtered vision*” (AN 139; my emphasis).

According to Zavarzadeh’s analysis, “the camera watches Mailer who also watches Mailer who participates in the March. The reality is filtered through so many reflectors a Chinese-box structure seems to surround the core of the alleged real” (1976: 167). The narrative world of *Armies* is both “mediated” and “warped” in various ways, and, as a participant in the March, partly anticipating his role as the author-narrator, Mailer tries to find a clear vision of the events despite his actual near-sightedness and his often unclear focus.²⁰ Through these self-conscious optical techniques (which

such document-based narratives as Mailer’s *Executioner* or DeLillo’s *Libra* would not have been possible except in the (post)modern, technological media culture. In *Armies*, Mailer’s sense that he is inside a documentary film and is constrained by various technical devices, also reflects the “impurity” of literature in the age of media culture. As Joe Moran puts it, in *Armies* Mailer deals in depth with the way in which his persona has become “an inseparable combination of self-creation and media invention” (2000: 71). Still, we may note a certain amount of dissatisfaction in Mailer’s reflections upon his “media” role in *Armies*: “Watching himself talk on camera for earlier documentary, he was not pleased with himself as a subject” (AN 134).

¹⁹ In *St. George and the Godfather* Mailer uses a similar kind of audience-addressing rhetoric when alluding to self-conscious narrative conventions: “But good Mayor Hall – *if the reader can take the shock* of this truly American shift-transmission – is out at Miami International Airport” (SGG 9; my emphasis).

²⁰ Through its construction of “Mailer” both inside and outside the narrated story-world and its complex relationship between the “seeing” and “telling” self, *The Armies*

feel extremely real as opposed to being only metaphors and allusions as in fiction), the events of the demonstration become even more obscure, as if Mailer were consciously using formalist techniques of defamiliarization in his perception of objects and phenomena of the world. According to Lilian Furst, complex literary texts need to be read through various “lenses,” “the reader’s lens” being on the level of its own, while there are other lenses on the level of the narrative text and its represented world. Therefore the “lenses” of the narrators and the protagonists play important roles as well, and “[t]hese multiple lenses, which may intersect or overlap, [...] affect a reader’s relationship to a given text” (1992b: 5). In a rhetorical sense, the author “provides” lenses through which the reader can “see” both this text and the world. As Shklovsky and other Russian Formalists put it, the special task of literature is to give us back our awareness of things which have become habitualized in our daily perception of them. The formalists therefore foreground their belief in such art which, through its very devices, leads people to see reality with “new” eyes; *reality* “as such,” however, appears to interest the formalists relatively little as they are more interested in the ways literature reveals that reality to the reader.

To re-formulate Shklovsky’s famous notion about Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, Mailer’s *Armies* may be the most typical *nonfiction* novel in world literature just because of its intensive process of ‘laying bare’ its devices (cf. Shklovsky 1998 [1929]: 170). Sterne’s novel defamiliarizes the “automatized” conventions of the narrative form by means of estrangement and by laying bare of its techniques, using “the anomalies of the act of narration itself as an instrument for making the reader conscious of the mediacy of the novel” (Stanzel 1984 [1979]: 6).²¹ In the process of “making it strange” the narrated world itself may become a new kind of experience, as events are seen for the very first time, through “innocent” eyes. For example, at the beginning of the march on the Pentagon, Mailer transforms his literal near-

of the Night uses somewhat similar devices as Nabokov in his novel *The Eye*, which is about the narrator’s self-conscious observation of his (or his “double’s”) activities and which employs various allusions to visual optics and media (e.g. Jacobs 2001: 72-74; Grishakova 2004: 125-129). Near the beginning of *The Prisoner of Sex* Mailer acknowledges Nabokov’s influence: “How could one really look Nabokov in *the eye*?” (PS 6; my emphasis).

²¹ Zavarzadeh, in his theory of the nonfiction novel (and with *Armies* as one of his main examples) argues that “[i]nternally the [traditional] novel has also lost its literary vigor through the ‘automatization’ of its basic narrative devices such as ‘character’ and ‘plot’ as well as its main mediative means – a transparent and communal language,” and consequently “[t]he ‘disautomatization’ of [this] narrative device in postwar writing is one of the literary factors responsible for the emergence of such nontotalizing genres of narratives as transfiction and the nonfiction novel” (1976: 29-30, 31).

sightedness into figurative obscurities of the future occurrences: “Mailer, of course, knew little of this yet – he was certainly too nearsighted to see that far ahead, and much too vain to wear his eyeglasses” (AN 106). In *War and Peace* Tolstoy makes a point of presenting historical events so that they are seen and experienced by people who are in the middle of those events. Dorrit Cohn typically argues that “only fiction is able to create the impression of presenting historical events at the moment they happen, thereby bringing to life the ‘raw, vital material of experience’ without the distortions of hindsight” (1999: 152). In my view, Mailer’s *Armies* is a history written by the experiencing and perceiving self, but it self-consciously plays with novelistic and “fictive” devices. In *Armies*, the “war” scene can only be represented as an absurd event, that yields no possibility of constructing a clear and comprehensive vision and where one is more likely to lose one’s sight altogether (because the Military Police is using gas that induces temporary blindness): “Mailer’s eyesight was not good – the thought of Mace in his hard-used eyes inspired a small horror” (AN 56). As Mailer reflects on the context of the demonstration as a whole, “the air was violent, yet full of amusement; *out of focus*” (AN 81; my emphasis), so that “the fine line of earlier perception (and Vision!) got mucked in the general confusion” (AN 118). The chaos of the demonstration and the random attack of the military police is experienced by the character Mailer as a weird visual image:

On came the rush, the men carrying the standard running at an odd angle, as if the weight of the flag and pole brought their bodies and arms out too far ahead of their legs, so that they gave the impression, like Groucho Marx, of having torsos too large and too humped over for their limbs, (or perhaps this image came from the protection and stuffing they wore). (AN 126)

However, Mailer’s pondering of “this image” leads him (inside the same long sentence) to a further reflection and recognition: “[A]nd *Mailer knew where he had seen this before*, this posture of men running in charge, yet it had been in *the photographs of Mathew Brady* of Union soldiers on the attack across the field” (AN 126; my emphases). Seeing the charge repelled, Mailer relives the Civil War experience of the protagonist of Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* (cf. Lounsbury 1990: 161). Here specific cultural frames and schemes (in this case, well-known images and allusions) provide cognitive devices which familiarize the obscure and unfamiliar scene, making it meaningful and even understandable for the perceiving self.

A little earlier, Mailer reflects on “his imagination, in lockstep to many a montage in many an old movie” (AN 119): he sees the events in cultural and

cognitive frames. Still, he wants to be “scrupulously phenomenological” (AN 119) in order to get the details, sounds and sights “right,” in keeping with his own perception. Reflecting upon the confusion in the middle of the event, Mailer recurses to visual “imagination” in an attempt to build a coherent and reasonably comprehensive picture of the event which itself seems unreal:

Mailer had then that superimposition of vision which makes descriptions of combat so contradictory when one compares eyewitness reports – he did not literally see any uniformed soldiers or marshals chasing this civilian army down the embankment, there was nothing but demonstrators flying toward them now, panic on their faces, but Mailer’s imagination so clearly conceived MPs chasing them with bayonets that for an instant he did literally see fixed bayonets and knew in some other part of himself he didn’t, like two transparent images superimposed. (AN 127; my emphasis)

Here Mailer appears to make explicit his “hypothetical focalization,” which “entails the use of hypotheses, framed by the narrator or a character, about what might be or might have been seen or perceived” (Herman 1994: 231). This mode of focalization typically highlights uncertainty, guesswork, or ignorance on the part of the focalizer, emphasizing the “as if” situation, and involving “an actual observer whose focalizing acts are presented as contrary to fact” (Herman 2002: 308, 321, 322). The spatio-temporal world of *Armies* is constructed upon ambiguity, uncertainty, and doubt; it is not a controlled chaos of fiction, but the real chaos of the actual world (or here, the possible world which is the direct model of the actual world). Because of this, the witness-participant’s images are often hypothetical, based on guesswork, and as it turns out, sometimes “counterfactual,” even though not deliberately *unreliable*. Instead of making his “imagination” an easy tool for constructing realities of its own, Mailer must constantly problematize both the reality of the events, the eyewitness reports, the “official” statements, journalistic accounts, and his own ways of meaning-making. In *The Armies of the Night* Mailer uses his character-self as a more or less artistic and imaginative *filter* whose personal participation in historical events provides at least some reliable perceptions of the endless complexities of reality; Mailer has “made himself the protagonist of the story, filtering the history through the prism of his own ambivalence” (Dickstein 2002: 159). Though he does so in a bid for the authority of a first-hand witness, he emerges as the (post)modern Whitman asking his reader to “filter” the things through him- or herself.²²

²² As Whitman’s poetic self puts it in “Song of Myself”: “You shall no longer take things at second or third hand. / You shall listen to all sides and *filter* them from yourself” (1976 [1855]: 26; my emphasis).

The Novel as a Mirror and Telescope

When Mailer divides his narrative into two parts in *The Armies of the Night*, he seems to suggest that the novelistic first part of the book is a necessary prelude to the historical second part (see Weber 1974: 19). Both personal and textual “schizophrenia” seems to define some of Mailer’s nonfiction; in *Armies* the schizophrenia “is not just stated in the book but enacted in its very narrative fabric and point of view” (Zavarzadeh 1976: 175). For Linda Hutcheon, *Armies* serves as an example of a text which “would actually show its building blocks” and which appears “deliberately schizoid for this reason: it is subtitled both ‘the novel as history’ and ‘history as a novel’” (1984: 28-29). These generic signs and conventions (history and the novel) are, however, only indicative of the theoretical problem which is grappled with inside the narrative text. Every now and then the author-narrator “stops” his narrative in order to draw the reader into a reflexive discussion:

Doubtless it has been hardly possible to ignore that this work resides in two enclaves, the first entitled History As a Novel, the second here before us called The Novel As History. No one familiar with husking the ambiguities of English will be much mystified by the titles. It is obvious that the first book is a history in the guise or dress or manifest of a novel, and the second is a real or true novel – no less! – presented in the style of history. (Of course, everyone including the author will continue to speak of the first book as a novel and the second as a history – practical usage finds flavor in such comfortable opposites.) (AN 254-255; my emphases)

Mailer’s authorial rhetoric, as conducted through his self-conscious narrative voice here, plays with the assumptions and expectations of his audience. It is reasonable to argue that to this audience (consisting of flesh-and-blood readers on various “audience” levels) questions are not necessarily “familiar,” “obvious” or without a “doubt.” Still, the author-narrator argues that there is “practical usage” to construct such “comfortable opposites” as history and the novel, although in actual practice those binarities are somewhat blurred through the text’s constant self-mirroring and through the profoundly dialectic relationship of these concepts.

Mailer further juxtaposes the two “books” as follows:

[T]he first book can be, in the formal sense, nothing but a personal history which while written as a novel was to the best of the author’s memory scrupulous to facts, and therefore a document; whereas the second, while dutiful to all newspaper accounts, eyewitness reports, and historic inductions available, while even obedient to a general style of historical writing, at least up to this point, while even pretending to be history (on the basis of its introduction) is finally now to be disclosed as some

sort of condensation of a collective novel – which is to admit that *an explanation of the mystery of the events at the Pentagon cannot be developed by the methods of history – only by the instincts of the novelist.* (AN 255; my emphasis)

The author-narrator goes on to note that because “the history is interior” and because “no documents can give sufficient intimation,” *the novel* “must replace history at precisely that point where experience is sufficiently emotional, spiritual, psychical, moral, existential, or supernatural” (AN 255). After the “limits of historic inquiry” are “now relinquished,” the author-narrator states that “[t]he collective novel which follows, while still written in the cloak of an historic style, and, therefore, continuously attempting to be scrupulous to the welter of a hundred confusing and opposed facts, will now unashamedly enter *that world of strange lights and intuitive speculation that is the novel*” (AN 255; my emphasis).

However, there is no clear basis to argue that Mailer, in his novel/history, “is essentially *disavowing* the expectations and responsibilities traditionally associated with either discipline” (Newman 1985: 113). Cohn, despite her somewhat prejudiced approach to various hybrid forms, importantly notes that “generic borderline cases, [...] far from effacing the border they straddle, offer an opportunity to study the historical and theoretical grounds for its existence” (1999: 116). Thus Mailer may be giving new directions to his “reflexive” readers as how to read complex modern narratives which do not follow strict generic rules:

Throughout the text the terms “novel” and “history” are fused and confused self-consciously until they seem to lose their autonomy as concepts, becoming some hybrid that questions the existence of novel and history as discrete writing forms, and that, in turn, questions the epistemological bases of these forms. The subtitle of the text, *History as a Novel, The Novel as History*, is emblematic of this questioning in that it does not resolve itself into some synthetic new term like nonfiction novel but is instead presented as an unstable chiasmus. (Reed 1992: 98)

As Lucien Dällenbach remarks, “there is no reason in principle why the textual *mise en abyme* could not extend to [a] an aesthetic theory; [b] an aesthetic debate; [c] a manifesto; [d] a creed; [e] an indication of the purpose assigned to the book by the author of the book itself” (1989 [1977]: 99). Metatextual signs may also operate as *instructions*, enabling “the reader to perform his/her task more easily: imitating, as if in a mirror, the actions of reflection; *reading the work in the way it wants to be read*” (ibid.: 99-100). As Ross Chambers notes, however, “one should not allow one’s own mode of reading to be determined exclusively by the text’s *situational self-reflexivity* – that is, by the ideology of art to which the text happens to subscribe”

(1984: 27; my emphasis). T.V. Reed, on the other hand, sees deliberate hermeneutical and interpretive problematics at the core of *Armies*, so that the book “is constructed in such a way that the problem of *reading the text* and the problem of *reading the event* illuminate each other” (1992: 90; my emphases). We may consider this reflexive device a characteristic feature in Mailer’s nonfictional poetics.

While Book One of *Armies*, discussed above, tries to describe the character Norman Mailer’s involvement in the March on the Pentagon, Book Two, “The Novel as History: The Battle of the Pentagon,” attempts to represent the same event by using the tools of journalism and historiography, at least seemingly shifting (or raising) the subjective, participatory viewpoint of the first book onto the level of a detached, “objective” vision. Throughout the book it is implied, and occasionally made explicit, that the “mysterious” and “ambiguous” event itself requires these different viewpoints, techniques, and generic styles. According to Hayden White’s thesis (to be discussed more closely in Chapter VI), a “modernist event” does not lend itself to explanation and understanding in terms of conventional categories and techniques, and therefore classical realist narration must be replaced with abstract forms, fragmented images, and subjective filterings. Arguably, then, the “unnatural” events of, in particular, the twentieth century can only be approached with the help of techniques provided by literary modernism. Accordingly, White cites Primo Levi’s way of laying bare his narrative devices in his subjective representations of the actuality of the Holocaust in *Il Sistema periodico*. In that book Levi reflects upon his own writing so that at a certain point the reader realizes that “this is not a chemical treatise,” “nor is it an autobiography,” “but it is in some fashion a history,” and “it is – or would have liked to be – a microhistory” (see White 1999: 42). In another context, Levi has discussed his attempts at producing “a filtered truth” through a “self-conscious book.”²³

In *The Armies of the Night* the march on the Pentagon is represented as a “paradigm” of the contradictions of the twentieth century, “an ambiguous event whose essential value or absurdity may not be established for ten or twenty years, or indeed ever” (AN 53). This inherent complexity, indeterminacy, ambiguity, and contradictoriness of the event cannot be approached and understood from the “objective” and “factual” viewpoint of the estab-

²³ According to John Russell, Levi’s *The Periodic Table* is one of the masterpieces of “the nonfiction novel,” a literary form which adheres to truthfulness but “slants” and “filters” actual experiences through the subjectivity and artistry of the author-narrator, producing a self-consciously “fashioned text” and “formal object” (see 2000: 6-8, 107).

lished media or those people, like the organizers of the march, who are “the real principals”:

For that, an eyewitness who is a participant but not a vested partisan is required, further he must not only be involved, but ambiguous in his own proportions, a comic hero, which is to say, one cannot happily resolve the emphasis of the category – is he finally comic, a ludicrous figure with mock-heroic associations; or is he not unheroic, and therefore embedded somewhat tragically in the comic? Or is he both at once, and all at once? These questions, which probably are not much more answerable than the very ambiguities of the event, at least help to recapture the precise feel of the ambiguity of the event and its monumental disproportions (AN 53).

Mailer proceeds from here to suggest that a complex and ambiguous (modern) event like this requires a deliberately new kind of representation. What is especially idiosyncratic (or “Mailerian”) here is that Mailer’s own ego and character serve as a “tool” and “vehicle” in the approach to the “crazy” history, for “[o]nce History inhabits a crazy house, egotism may be the last tool left to History” (AN 54). In this sense, Mailer uses “himself,” the novelistic protagonist Norman Mailer, as a ‘mimetic,’ ‘thematic,’ and ‘synthetic’ component which would reflect the complex event itself (see Phelan 1989: 190-198; see also Chapter VI). Pondering the very ambiguity of the event which requires an ambiguous protagonist, the author-narrator declares: “Let us then make our comic hero [Norman Mailer] the *narrative vehicle* for the March on the Pentagon” (AN 54; my emphasis).

The Armies of the Night is Mailer’s more or less conscious rewriting of Henry Adams’s autobiography *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918) in which the author-narrator similarly refers to himself in the third person.²⁴ We may even note that Mailer’s self-creation as a “Left Conservative” in *Armies* alludes to Adams’s earlier “Conservative Christian Anarchism” in *Education* (see Whalen-Bridge 1998: 107). The self-consciousness of narrative conventions is made explicit in the scene of *Armies* where Norman Mailer goes back to his hotel after a party, wondering “if the Adams in the name of his hotel bore any relation to Henry” (AN 54):

²⁴ In his essay focusing on *The Education of Henry Adams*, White contemplates how “the author seeks to characterize his own book, assign it to a genre and identify its specificity within the genre” and how the author “speaks of himself in the third person singular – as ‘he,’ ‘Adams,’ and so forth – splitting himself into both the speaker who is hidden behind the anonymity of the narrative form and the referent or subject of the narrative, who occupies the center stage” (1987: 207). These descriptions would be quite apt in the case of Mailer’s *Armies* as well, and so would White’s comment (pertaining to Adams’s work), that “the classic text reveals, indeed actively draws attention to, its own process of meaning-production and makes of these processes its own subject matter, its own ‘content’” (ibid.: 211).

Some time in the early morning, or not so early, Mailer got to bed at the Hay-Adams and fell asleep to dream no doubt of fancy parties in Georgetown when the Federal period in architecture was young. Of course if this were a novel, Mailer would spend the rest of the night with a lady. But it is history, and so the Novelist is for once blissfully removed from a description of the hump-your-backs of sex. Rather he can leave such matters to the happy or unhappy imagination of the reader (AN 52; my emphases).²⁵

Here we see a comically disguised and seemingly paradoxical self-reflection which suggests that in *history* the author is, for once, freed from the use of his obsessive imagination, whereas in *a novel* there are conventions that the “Novelist,” as Mailer calls himself, is “obliged” to follow – such as the reference to a sex scene that apparently did not take place. From a more “serious” perspective, of course, the distinction between the character Mailer and the author Mailer highlights the problems of historiography. In her discussion of “what history *cannot* be or do,” Cohn writes that historiography “cannot present past events through the eyes of a historical figure present on the scene, but only through the eyes of the (forever backward-looking) historian-narrator” (1999: 119). However, in *Armies* we have a “peculiar” case of an individual narrative, for the historical figure who is represented as acting on the scene is simultaneously distinct from the author-narrator (in a self-consciously “novelistic” vein) and still very close, if not identical, with that author-narrator (as in the actual autobiography). After having stated that this is “history,” not a “novel,” Mailer breaks the rule by constructing himself as a novelistic character but, ironically, only after “he” (the character) has fallen asleep: “All right, let us look into his mind” (AN 55). Even more ironically, the pattern is repeated when Mailer is arrested after the march and as he falls asleep in jail: “Let us leave him as he passes into sleep. *The argument in his brain can be submitted to the reader in the following pages with somewhat more order* than Mailer possessed on his long voyage out into the unfamiliar dimensions of prison rest” (AN 181; my emphasis). Here the “classic” distinction between the mature, ruminating

²⁵ It may be interesting to note that Shklovsky finds a similar kind of self-reflexive device in the work of V. Rozanov, representing the early twentieth century Russian “documentary prose,” “literature of fact” or “factography”: “It is given its most popular form in the following comment: ‘If I had written a novel, the hero would have done this and that, but since I’m not writing a novel...’ and the novel moves forward. [...] Generally speaking, when an author suggests that he is abandoning literature, he is actually *introducing a motivation for a new literary genre*” (1998 [1929]: 199). In fact, Shklovsky himself has been regarded as one of the first practitioners of what may be called a ‘nonfiction novel.’ Russell notes that Shklovsky’s memoir *A Sentimental Journey* (1923) is “one of the first self-perceived nonfiction novels of the century,” representing the theorist’s own coinage of ‘factography’ “as a potentially new art form” (2000: 11).

authorial narrator and the confused, experiencing character is foregrounded in a comical tone.²⁶

It is an inherent part of Mailer's textual construction in *The Armies of the Night* to foreground the very artificiality of his "realism." According to a more or less postmodernist argument, realism is, ultimately, a *subjective filter* that evaluates and distorts reality (cf. Furst 1992a: 10). In the Mailerian type of postmodernist nonfiction, the transparent *window* on reality – both an ideological illusion and technical device typical of realistic fiction and conventional journalism using "unnoticeable" language – is broken and replaced with *prisms* which visualize reality from different angles, or *mirrors* which reflect various discursive ways of perceiving the world. As Daniel Lehman describes the experience of reading nonfiction, which is always a *constructed* text, "the 'history' that I meet in the mirrored screen of the text is at once mediated and thus 'other'" (1997: 115). In a sense, the old metaphor of window is returning to our theoretical terminology via digital aesthetics and hypermedia. In his book *Interface Culture*, Steven Johnson makes some preliminary comparisons between hypermedia links and the new "metajournalism," employing the concept of window in both cases (see 1997: 103-105).²⁷ Digital windows and links may be more in touch with our age of the electronic media culture, so that there may be some old-fashioned grace in the more traditional metaphors (like "lens," "telescope," or "microscope") that Mailer uses in *The Armies of the Night* to describe his sense of the 'novel':

As a working craftsman, a journeyman artist, he [the Novelist] is not without his guile; he has come to decide that *if you would see the horizon from a forest, you must build a tower*. [...] So the Novelist working in secret collaboration with the Historian has perhaps tried to build with his novel a tower fully equipped with telescopes to study – at the greatest advantage – our own horizon. Of course, the tower is crooked, and the telescopes are warped, but the instruments of all sciences – history so much as physics – are always constructed in small or large error; what supports the use of them now is that our intimacy with the master builder of the

²⁶ These scenes in *Armies* clearly allude to Mailer's early short story "The Man Who Studied Yoga" in which the narrator "studies" a would-be novelist Sam Slovoda: "Obligitorily, I study him, Sam Slovoda who is neither ordinary nor extraordinary, who is not young nor yet old, not tall nor short. *He is sleeping, and it is fit to describe him now*" (AM 143; my emphasis). This device (which Mailer may have adopted from Dickens, e.g., *Bleak House*) is also employed in Mailer's presentation of the astronauts in *Of a Fire on the Moon*, in the chapter "A Sleep on the Moon."

²⁷ Compare also J. Yellowlees Douglas's discussion of "digital narratives and the new realism" in her book *The End of Books – Or Books Without End? Reading Interactive Narratives*, where the new media are seen to be transforming our ways of representing reality. Interestingly, Douglas also refers to the practices developed by the New Journalism (see 2000: 160-161).

tower, and the lens grinder of the telescopes (yes, even the machinist of the barrels) has given some advantage for correcting the error of the instruments and the imbalance of his tower. May that be claimed for many histories? In fact, how many novels can be put so quickly to use? (For the novel – if we permit ourselves this parenthesis – is, when it is good, the personification of a vision which will enable one to comprehend other visions better; a microscope – if one is exploring the pond; *a telescope upon a tower if you are scrutinizing the forest*). (AN 219; my emphases)

Through the dense, extended metaphoricity of this passage the author draws the reader's attention to the writing process, materiality, and generic type of this book, proceeding to contemplate what can be done with this medium. The paragraph above may be recognized as one the programmatic statements in Mailer's poetics of nonfiction. The metaphors of the passage function in an obscure and clarifying sense at the same time: the reality is both defamiliarized and seen through new "eyes" so that the nature of reality can be exposed. As Mailer's figuration suggests, the world of reality ("the horizon") is contaminated and obscured by "a forest," and in order to see through the forest and reach the horizon, one must "build the tower," that is, an appropriately lofty textual construction.

After stating that "[t]he method [of this book] is then exposed" (AN 219), Mailer makes a polemic distinction between the shortcomings of the media representations and his idea of the novel and its "optics": "The mass media which surrounded the March on the Pentagon created a forest of inaccuracy which would then blind the efforts of an historian; our novel has provided us with the possibility, no, even the instrument to view our facts and conceivably study them in that field of light a labor of lens-grinding has produced" (AN 219).²⁸ In the following, after quoting and commenting on the always partial and distorted newspaper accounts of the March, Mailer stresses that "it may be obvious by now that a history of the March on the Pentagon which is not unfair will never be written, any more than a history which could prove dependable in details!" (AN 262). It is because of this that Mailer even feels like abandoning "history," for in crucial places history and journalism must be replaced by "the novel." Still, if we go back to the long paragraph cited above, we see that actually "the Novelist [is] working in secret collaboration with the Historian," and as it is reflected on the same page, "[t]he Novelist in passing his baton to the Historian has a happy smile" (AN 219). On the one hand, the methods, conventions and devices of novel and history are being juxtaposed and finally distinguished from

²⁸ According to one (rather unfavorable) critic, Mailer "appears to believe that the novelist can correct the historian by bringing finer instruments to the observation of human affairs," and "[t]he novel, 'a telescope upon a tower,' seems to correct false history and to provide meaning" (Berger 1977: 172, 251).

each other; on the other hand, a reciprocal, dialectic, dialogic, and in a sense rhetorical relationship and interaction are established between them.

Mailer's Vision and Rhetoric

The Author and His Audience

The ending of part one of *The Armies of the Night* – the last chapter that gradually transforms “History as a Novel” into “The Novel as History” – reasserts the book’s self-consciousness in a complex way. After his own participation in the March has ended (and after he has been released from jail), Mailer “contract[s] to write an account of the March on the Pentagon, and wrestl[es] with the difficulties of how to do it” (AN 215). At this point of the narrative text, the character Mailer, previously distinguished from the author Mailer, is about to reach the authorial position:

Then he began his history of the Pentagon. It insisted on becoming a history of himself over four days, and therefore was *history in the costume of a novel*. He labored in the aesthetic of the problem for weeks, discovering that his dimensions as a character were simple: blessed had been the novelist, for his protagonist was a simple of a hero and a marvel of a fool, with more than average gifts of objectivity – might his critics have as much! – this verdict disclosed by the unprotective haste with which he was obliged to write, for he wrote of necessity at a rate faster than he had ever written before, as if the accelerating history of the country forbade deliberation. Yet in writing his personal history of these four days, he was delivered a discovery of what the March on the Pentagon had finally meant, and what had been won, and what had been lost, and so found himself ready at last to write a most concise Short History, a veritable précis of a collective novel, *which here now, in the remaining pages, will seek as History, no, rather as some Novel of History* to elucidate the mysterious character of that quintessentially American event. (AN 215-216; my emphases)

It is one of main features of self-reflexive nonfiction to draw the reader’s attention to its own production and emphasize the materiality of the book. In the paragraph above, Mailer refers to his novel, “which here now, in the remaining pages” attempts to shed some light on the obscurities and mysteries of the event. It is only through the subsequent writing of the book that Mailer can make some sense of and bring order to this “mysterious character” of the March on the Pentagon.

Characterized narrators not only treat the narrative process thematically while narrating, but also reveal their awareness of the presence of their

audience, and “[t]his obliges them to find a narrative strategy or rhetoric appropriate to the audience as well as to their story” (Stanzel 1984 [1979]: 147). While the character Mailer frequently acts on the story level in front of various audiences (explicitly so, for example, in his “performance” in the Ambassador Theater), Mailer as the author-narrator addresses his audience or his “implied” reader on the level of narrative discourse. The concept and idea of an *implied reader* incorporates, in Wolfgang Iser’s words, “both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text, and the reader’s actualization of this potential through the reading process” (1974 [1972]: xii). Iser modifies the (Boothian) idea of a *rhetorical* communication where the reader is transformed into the image created by the author through the author’s rhetorical acts. As Iser argues, “the reader has to be stimulated into certain activities, which may be guided by rhetorical signposts, but which lead to a process that is not merely rhetorical” (ibid.: 30). Iser’s theoretical hypotheses become actualized, as it were, through his discussion of such eighteenth-century novels and novelists (Fielding, Sterne), who were conscious of the interplay with the reader, and whose narratives imply and position their audiences.

As noted earlier, the New Journalists of the sixties adopted the classical, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century realistic techniques of the novel (e.g. Fielding, Balzac, Dickens) also employing self-conscious literary references. According to Tom Wolfe, in *The Armies of the Night* Mailer addresses the reader in the style of the classical novel, including “a craving for Victorian rhetoric or for a Humphrey Clinkerism such as, ‘At this point the attentive reader may wonder how our hero could possibly...’” (1973: 33). Just as Fielding’s narrator in *Joseph Andrews* addresses the “mere English reader” or the “classical reader” who read guided by own conventions and expectations, Mailer, in *Armies*, suddenly stops his narrative and asks whether there still are “competent” readers in America, readers who know how to read complex and difficult novelistic texts:

One of the oldest devices of the novelist – some would call it a vice – is to bring his narrative (after many an excursion) to a pitch of excitement where the reader no matter how cultivated is reduced to a beast who can pant no faster than to ask, “And then what? Then what happens?” At which point the novelist, consummate cruel lover, introduces a digression, aware that delay at this point helps to deepen the addiction of his audience.

This, of course, was Victorian practice. Modern audiences, accustomed to superhighways, put aside their reading at the first annoyance and turn to the television set. So a modern novelist must apologize, even apologize profusely,

for daring to leave his narrative, he must in fact absolve himself of the charge of employing a device, he must plead necessity. (AN 133)²⁹

In what follows, the author-narrator seems to be demanding of the reader-narratee both patience and complex thinking, for the narrative is going to be more complicated, introducing new devices, aims, and materials into its construction. In this sense the author-narrator gives a specific role to his audience or “narratee,” as defined by Gerald Prince:

The most obvious role of the narratee, a role that he always plays in a certain sense, is that of relay between the narrator and the reader(s), or rather between the author and the reader(s). Should certain values have to be defended or certain ambiguities clarified, this can easily be done by means of asides addressed to the narratee (1980 [1973]: 20-21).

Armies is a book which is almost constantly concerned with the processes of its writing and with the reader’s involvement in its form and intent, employing certain reader-addressing rhetoric. Thus the device taken from classical novels also reflects such activity and involvement on the reader’s part.

It has been argued that in *The Armies of the Night* by the term ‘novel’ Mailer seems to mean what is usually meant by the term ‘rhetoric’ (see

²⁹ These classical novelistic devices are famously also employed by John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, written at the same time as Mailer’s *Armies*. Phelan is interested in the authorial audience of Fowles’s novel, the audience “which knows the conventions of both nineteenth- and twentieth-century narration” and “recognizes the twentieth-century novelist adopting the nineteenth-century conventions” (1989: 86; cf. also Brax 2003: 116 and *passim*). In *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer’s narrative voice problematizes the “modern novelist’s” successful communication with his “modern audiences,” for the *reading* of literary texts, especially complex ones, appears to be a vanishing practice. Therefore, as mentioned before, Mailer’s “hectoring” narrative voice may be directed towards a certain audience. However, one is able to see Mailer’s irony behind his rhetoric and his attempt to construct distinct audiences or certain “amiable communities” which “get” his message while others do not (see Chapter II). Apparently, “this Victorian practice” reflected in the passage is something that greatly “annoys” modern television audiences, those same audiences that hardly become ideal audiences of *this* book, *The Armies of the Night*. In addition, we may see how Mailer uses the metaphor of “superhighway” to convey the sense of the American audience’s linear, straightforward, and unimaginative approach to reality, an approach powerfully “created” by Mailer’s old enemy, television. In his 1997 article on Bill Clinton’s presidential campaign, “How the Pharaoh Beat Bogey,” Mailer employs his “superhighway” metaphor in a new context as he feels obliged to criticize Clinton’s celebration of “the information superhighway,” that is the Internet, which reminds Mailer of the Interstate: “It was a real superhighway, efficient yet deadening. Masses of quickly available processed information would soon bear the same relation to culture that a superhighway presents to a country road. [...] With the World Wide Web, we will be given the screen of a monitor rather than the page of a book. But people wanted the technological world. It was simpler” (TOT 1170).

Anderson 1987: 114-115) and that Mailer's book "is supremely a text about rhetoric" (Byatt 2000: 102). As *Armies* eventually proves to turn into a "novel," it also acquires features of argumentation and teaching in the old rhetorical tradition, representing a defense of poetry and humanity in this age of technology and nihilism. Chris Anderson argues that in *Armies* "the subject is rhetoric itself," that the book "is about speechmaking," and that "[i]n the process of describing these rhetorical performances, Mailer assumes the role of rhetorical critic" (1987: 98-99). The narrative consists of Mailer's various confrontations with public and private discourses such as political rhetoric, "totalitarian" language, youth language, poetry and prose. In the chapter entitled "In the Rhetoric," we are able to observe how Mailer emerges as a rhetorical critic, himself employing a rhetoric of irony, when seeing the striking similarities between the discourse of the New Left and the discourse of political hegemony:

Only [Paul] Goodman could say 'at the present in the world,' 'implement,' 'disastrous policies,' 'overwhelming lobby,' 'expand and rigidify,' 'everything he said was right, so naturally it had to be said in a style which read like LBJ's exercises in Upper Rhetoric (the Rhetoric, Mailer now decided, being located three inches below and back of Erogenous Zone Clitoric) (AN 109).

Mailer actually defines his own "obscene" presentation in the Ambassador Theater as an attempt to "live on the edge of that rhetorical sword he would soon try to run through the heart of the audience" (AN 46). In this context, Mailer addresses the audience by foregrounding the purpose of the March on the Pentagon, stressing his belief that "this will be at once *a symbolic act and a real act*" (AN 47; my emphasis).

It is quite typical of Mailer to reflect upon his own role and position as a writer through such metaphorical explanations as "the master builder of the tower," "the lens grinder of the telescopes," or "the machinist of the barrels." In addition, it is typical of Mailer's rhetoric to detach himself from the discourse and draw the reader into the signification process.³⁰ For instance, Mailer's characteristic use of various temporal and spatial deictics ("which *here now*, in the remaining pages") signals a strong reflective consciousness behind the writing of the book (see Fludernik 1996: 194). As we have seen, in *Armies* Mailer as author-narrator refers to himself as "he" or "Mailer" (as he does in his other nonfiction); but there are also other rhe-

³⁰ This happens, for example, through specific rhetorical devices: "[Such] appeals to the reader, asking him or her enter the universe of the text, are also found in direct address constructions of the type 'as you will understand', 'if you know what I mean', and so on, to which correspond indirect expressions like 'the reader will know', or 'from this, one may see', etc." (Mey 2000: 29-30).

torical devices, some of them almost identifying the author and the reader, such as the pronouns “one,” “you,” “we,” and “our.” So, for example in the long paragraph, cited above, about the novel as a telescope, the sequence of the pronouns is as follows: *he, he, you, you, his, our, our, his, we, one, one,* and *you*. It can be noted that these pronouns are linked together, so that “his” (the Novelist’s) way of seeing and constructing is very much “your” way, “one’s” way and “our” way. While there is a clear reader-addressing rhetoric operating here, the author-narrator is obviously also constructing an authorial reader who will emerge through this text. On the microlevel of self-reflection we can further see Mailer’s typical way of using such reader-activating expressions as “so,” “of course,” “yes,” “in fact,” including his use of the parenthesis, which is also self-consciously referred to (“if we permit ourselves this parenthesis”).³¹

Language and Metaphor: Mailer as an American Jeremiah

It has been suggested that perhaps the attempt of the March on the Pentagon, especially as a symbolic media event, was “the literal deterritorialisation of the Pentagon” (Docherty 1996: 161). Thus the vision that Mailer gives in *The Armies of Night* – young idealistic hippies actually trying to “exorcise” the evil Pentagon by shouting the mantra “Out, demons, out!” (AN 124) – conveys both literal and figurative language. Mailer, not a young revolutionary anymore, but still the original prophet of the hipster, is obviously the representative of language and poetry (together with his companion in the march, Robert Lowell). It should be noted that *Armies* both consists of and comments on different American languages, several quotations of Lowell’s poetry probably exemplifying what Mailer considers to be modern American literature as its best. On the other hand, the “obscene” language previously experimented with in Mailer’s essays and reaching its bloom in his novel *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, is further discussed in *The Armies of the Night*.³² The book, we may note, contains a chapter entitled “Why Are We in Vietnam?”:

³¹ In *The Prisoner of Sex* the narrative ends in an even more self-reflexive device: “(And so saying realized he had been able to end a portentous piece in the soft sweet flesh of parentheses)” (PS 234).

³² While the narrator’s comically obscene style in *Why Are in Vietnam?* is based on American vernacular, this “D.J.” also comments on various languages and discourses: “For shit-and-sure, Señor Manure. That’s how they talk in the East, up in those bone Yankee ass Jew circumcised prick Wall Street palaces – take it from D.J. – he got psychic transistors in his ear (one more gift of the dying griz) which wingding on all-out pickup

Mailer never felt more like an American than when he was naturally obscene – all the gifts of the American language came out in the happy play of obscenity upon concept, which enabled one to go back to concept again. [...] he had kicked good-bye in his novel *Why Are We in Vietnam?* to the old literary corset of good taste, letting his sense of language play on obscenity as freely as it wished, so discovering that everything he knew about American language (with its incommensurable resources) went flying in and out of the line of his prose with the happiest beating of wings – it was the first time his style seemed at once very American to him and very literary in the best way, at least as he saw the best way (AN 48).

As in *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, Mailer actually uses both the figure and practice of obscenity as an antidote to a consensus culture whose typical representative, the corporative executive, “was perfectly capable of burning unseen women and children in the Vietnamese jungles, yet felt a large displeasure and fairly final disapproval at the generous use of obscenity in literature and in public” (AN 49; cf. Tabbi 1995: 222). As Leo Marx sees it, “Mailer is reflecting on the uses of obscenity in saving what is worth saving in [America’s] democratic ethos” (1988: 261). If we note that obscene language is a special kind of the vernacular and the colloquial, that is, a more modern variant of the rich soil of American literary language (“with its incommensurable resources”), we may suggest that on this level Mailer places himself in the tradition of Whitman (*Leaves of Grass*) and Twain (*Huckleberry Finn*).³³

The “poetic” and “linguistic” character of *The Armies of the Night* is also reflected in the fact that Mailer “the Novelist” takes his position in the front row in the demonstration together with Lowell “the Poet” and Macdonald “the Critic” (see AN 105). In fact, this trio of intellectuals is accompanied by a well-known linguist and political activist whom Mailer actually meets

each set of transcontinental dialogues from the hearts of the prissy-assed and the prigged. Fungatz, radatz, and back to piss” (WAWV 151).

³³ The “exorcism” of the Pentagon is conducted by the “obscene” hippie figures led by one Ed Sanders, “editor and publisher of a poetry magazine called *Fuck You*, renaissance conductor, composer, instrumentalist and vocalist of the Fugs, old protégé of Allen Ginsberg” (AN 122). Actually, the name of the rock group, “the Fugs,” is taken from Mailer’s first novel *The Naked and the Dead*, in which the young author was obliged, because of censorship, to coin a new word suitable for the vernacular of his soldiers, as in the experimental “Chorus” sections of the novel: “RED: What the *fug* is that swill? COOK: It’s owl shit. Wha’d you think it was? RED: Okay, I just thought it was somethin’ I couldn’t eat. (*Laughter*)” (NAD 76; my emphasis; cf. Manso 1985: 106; Lennon [ed.] 1988: 116-117). In *Armies* Mailer states his belief, emerging from his actual experiences as a soldier in the Pacific (and as represented in *Naked*) that “the sanity of said common democratic man was in his humor, his humor was in his obscenity” and “nothing was so important to Americans as humor” (AN 47, 48). In fact, as he continues, “if he was going to love something in the country, he would love that” (AN 48). In *Armies* Mailer is self-consciously the “censor” of his own obscene language, thus anticipating the way his language will be printed in newspapers: “But let us use asterisks for these obscenities

later in jail after their arrest: “So Mailer picked his bunk. It was next to Noam Chomsky, [...]. Now, as he bunked down next to Chomsky, Mailer looked for some way to open a discussion on linguistics” (AN 180). The beginning of the March is represented by Mailer as author-narrator and experienced by Mailer as character through poetic and romantic images of the heroic and revolutionary past: “The ghosts of old battles were wheeling like clouds over Washington today” (AN 91); “there was a love of evening in the warm morning air, a violet of late shadows, a ghost of Gettysburg and the knowledge that a sense of danger had finally come to the American left” (AN 97); “as if finally one stood under some mythical arch in the secret vault of history,” and “here, walking with Lowell and Macdonald, he felt as if he stepped through some crossing in the reaches of space between this moment, the French Revolution, and the Civil War, as if the ghosts of the Union Dead accompanied them now to the Bastille,” because “they were going to face the symbol, the embodiment, no, call it true and high church of the military-industrial complex, the Pentagon, blind five-sided eye of a subtle oppression” (AN 113). Inspired by Lowell’s charismatic and poetic presence, Mailer celebrates “wine of Civil War apples in the October air!” and lives at the “edge of excitement and awe,” without knowing how this day would end (AN 93).

When compared to other characters portrayed in *The Armies of the Night* (often in satirical tone), Mailer’s description of Robert Lowell is warm and respectful. Lowell, to Mailer and to the larger audience, is admirable “for his talent, his modesty, his superiority, his melancholy, his petulance, his weakness, his painful, almost stammering shyness, his noble strength” (AN 44-45). While Mailer knows that *he* himself will never be loved as much by the audience, he still sees strong affinities between them, arguing that “if they [Lowell and Mailer] were doomed to be revolutionaries, rebels, dissenters, anarchists, protesters, and general champions of one Left cause or another, they were also, in private, *grand conservateurs*, and if the truth be told, poor damn émigré princes” (AN 18). From this notion emerges Mailer’s famous self-definition as a “Left Conservative” (AN 124). What makes Mailer’s relationship to Lowell in *Armies* especially interesting is its being anchored in concerns with writing and poetry. It has been suggested that Lowell’s role as the “Poet” to Mailer’s “Novelist” has an obvious narrative and thematic function, since “[Lowell] is part of the rich play of oppositions within the

to emphasize how happily he used the words, they went off like fireworks in his orator’s heart, [...]. ‘You just know all those reporters are going to say it was sh*t tomorrow. F*ck them’” (AN 50).

volume” (Lounsberry 1990: 156).³⁴ In Mailer’s view, Lowell’s cultivated, finely detailed, and obviously old-fashioned mind does not seem to belong to the new world of the mass media, popular culture, or musical rhythms of the young people in front of the Pentagon. Mailer proceeds to characterize Lowell’s mind and poetry: “[E]ven if Lowell’s remarkable sense of rhythm drew one deep into the poems, nonetheless hypnotic they resolutely were not, for the language was particular, with a wicked sense of names, details, and places” (AN 136). Lowell’s poetry functions in the narrative also thematically, as a kind of *mise en abyme* structure, as we may see at the conclusion of the book.

Mailer’s representation of reality in his nonfictional work is highly *metaphorical*, so that “metaphors in Mailer’s writing are meant as points of departures rather than fixed images” (Anderson 1987: 95). As Barbara Lounsberry maintains in her *Art of Fact*, “Mailer’s metaphors are his means of enlarging his subjects and introducing new ideas,” “through metaphor Mailer also establishes intimacy with his readers,” and “so many of Mailer’s metaphors are elaborate trips and designed to stimulate or activate the reader” (1990: 139-140). The search for both appropriate form and metaphor is made explicit in the separate chapters of *The Armies of the Night*, with titles such as “A Novel Metaphor,” “Symbolic Search,” “An Arbitrated Aesthetic,” “A Palette of Tactics,” “An Aesthetic Tested,” “The Aesthetic Forged,” and, finally, “The Metaphor Delivered.” According to Wayne Booth’s analysis of the political rhetoric and self-conscious style of *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer is remaking “the ethos of America,” and his ‘mixed’ metaphors “are explicitly addressed to the reader’s view of America’s rebirth” (1988: 331; 1979: 59). Booth’s example is the poetic climax of Mailer’s book, “Metaphor Delivered”:

Whole crisis of Christianity in America that the military heroes were on one side, and the unnamed saints on the other! Let the bugle blow. The death of America

³⁴ One of the often-cited conversations between the two distinguished writers begins with Lowell’s remark: “‘You know, Norman,’ said Lowell in his fondest voice, ‘Elizabeth and I really think you’re the finest journalist in America’” (AN 31). Mailer, who refers to himself at this point as “the novelist,” finds something “annoying” here. So he goes back to the short phase in his career when he tried to write poetry – in *Deaths for the Ladies (and other disasters)* (1962) – and expected Lowell’s review to “canonize his thin tome” (AN 31). This review never appeared; instead, “Elizabeth Hardwick, Lowell’s wife, had just published a review of *An American Dream in Partisan Review* which had done its best to disembowel the novel” (AN 31). Although Mailer does not find it relevant here to cite Hardwick’s review (entitled “A Nightmare by Norman Mailer”), it can be noted that the tone of this review (“[A] dirty book, dirty and extremely ugly”; Hardwick 1971 [1965]: 146) is in a sharp contrast with the graciousness that the couple may now show toward Mailer’s journalism.

rides in on the smog. America – the land where a new kind of man was born from the idea that God was present in every man not only as compassion but as power, and so the country belonged to the people; for the will of the people – if the locks of their life could be given the art to turn – was then the will of God. Great and dangerous idea! If the locks did not turn, then the will of the people was the will of the Devil. Who by now could know where was that? Liars controlled the locks.

Brood on that country who expresses our will. She is America, once a beauty of magnificence unparalleled, now a beauty with a leprous skin. She is heavy with child – no one knows if legitimate – and languishes in a dungeon whose walls are never seen. Now the first contractions of her fearsome labor begin – it will go on: no doctor exists to tell the hour. It is only known that false labor is not likely on her now, no, she will probably give birth, and to what? – the most fearsome totalitarianism the world has ever known? or can she, poor giant, tormented lovely girl, *deliver a babe of a new world brave and tender, artful and wild?* Rush to the locks. God writhes in his bonds. Rush to the locks. Deliver us from our curse. For we must end on the road to that mystery where courage, death, and the dream of love give promise of sleep. (AN 288; my emphasis)

It is as if the quasi-documentary nature of the text is transcended in this metaphorical concluding chapter, which represents Mailer's "intense, hyperbolic rhetoric" and recalls, through its style and ideology, such traditional Anglo-American forms as 'the jeremiad' and 'the romance' (see Merrill 1992: 127-128).³⁵ For instance, Mailer's chant "rush to the locks" alludes to Whitman's shout "unscrew the locks from the doors!" in "Song of Myself"; on the other hand, Whitman's other texts such as "I Hear America Singing" or "Democratic Vistas" (an essay about a group of artist-intellectuals who try to transform American society) also function as models or subtexts for *Armies*.³⁶

The jeremiad is often in the mode of the political sermon, sometimes a hymn of hope and spiritual and moral renewal (see Schuchalter 1995: 140). As Sacvan Bercovitch defines it in his book *The American Jeremiad*, the jeremiad is a rhetorical and ideological mode of discourse, "a *ritual* designed to join social criticism with spiritual renewal" (1978: xi; my emphasis).³⁷ In his study Bercovitch also refers to Mailer's *Armies* (and its ending), seeing

³⁵ It is in the context of romantic rhetoric that we should read the paragraph's mythological or "essentialist" vision of America as a woman giving birth to an unknown, apocalyptic future. Recalling Mailer's subtext, *The Education of Henry Adams*, we may note "Adams's famous conversion from the reproductive labor of the virgin to the productive labor of the dynamo" (Tabbi 1995: 4).

³⁶ In Mailer's sentence about "a new world brave and tender" there is an obvious allusion to Shakespeare (*The Tempest*) and to Huxley (*Brave New World*).

³⁷ When reading Pynchon's *Vineland* (1990) as "a jeremiad against TV's corrosively negative influence on American public life," Brian McHale suggests that "deeply rooted in American Puritan culture, subsequently secularized as a vehicle of national self-criticism and self-assurance, the jeremiad genre continues to flourish in American public discourse" (1992: 123). Pynchon's critique of "the Tube" resembles Mailer's polemical

it as a 'diary-essay-tract-sermon' about Mailer's love affair with America (see *ibid.*: 204n). In this context it is appropriate that Mailer takes the title of his book from the concluding lines of Matthew Arnold's famous poem "Dover Beach":

Ah, love, let us be true
 To one another! for the world, which seems
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,
 So various, so beautiful, so new,
 Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
 And we are here as on a darkling plain
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight
 Where ignorant armies clash by night.³⁸

Arnold is, by some accounts, one of the representatives of "Victorian nonfiction as imaginative literature," adopting the tone and stance of the Old Testament prophets who, firstly, called attention to their audience's suffering which resulted from their neglect of God's law, but "completed the prophetic pattern by offering visions of bliss that their listeners would realize if they returned to the ways of God" (Landow 1986: 19, 26). It seems fitting, then, that George Landow places Mailer's work in the tradition of the jeremiad and, at the same time, in the tradition of Anglo-American nonfiction as "imaginative" literature. A crucial part in the rhetoric of modern "elegant jeremiahs" (Carlyle's, Arnold's, Ruskin's) is "the sage's contentious attitude toward his audience, his alternation of satire and vision, and his use of discontinuous literary structure" (*ibid.*: 28). However, Mailer, designating himself as "neo-Victorian" in *Armies* (AN 24), must be constantly aware of the potential religious skepticism of his modern audience, which is also the point in "Dover Beach."

As Richard Godden argues, the end of Mailer's book is difficult on several counts, but some light can be cast by reading it through the structural analogue between its two parts (see 1990: 245). Therefore, as Godden also

stance, rendering it, however, more ambivalent because of television's overwhelming influence in contemporary culture.

³⁸ It has been suggested that in these lines of "Dover Beach," written in 1867, Arnold himself is alluding to the revolutions of his own time or to the Siege of Rome by the French. A possible literary subtext of the poem is Thucydides's history of the Peloponnesian war, where armies are forced to fight in the darkness and obscurity of the night. According to one interpretation, Mailer's title implies that he must deal with equally ignorant armies, the one representing the anarchy of the young and the other representing the hegemonic forces of the establishment (see Merrill 1992: 124). "Dover Beach" also functions as a larger subtext in *Armies*, especially as regards the metaphors of the world as a land of dreams, the imagery of the silent wife, and the idea of the crisis of faith (see also Godden 1990: 229, 236-37).

suggests, we may note that Book One of *Armies* also closes with the themes of release, birth, and prayer, and that “Metaphor Delivered” alludes to the first chapter of Book Two, “A Novel Metaphor.” Whereas Mailer himself addresses his American audience at the closure of Book One using, uncharacteristically, Christian imagery (““You see, dear fellow Americans, it is Sunday, and we are burning the body and blood of Christ in Vietnam”” [AN 214]), he ends Book Two by “releasing” the oppressed voices of “naked Quakers,” those “unnamed saints” who still believe that America is God’s country, a country which expresses their will (AN 287, 288). Like Godden, Lounsberry also notes strong structural parallels in Mailer’s text, arguing that the controlling metaphor in the book is *the rite of passage* (see 1990: 152). Whereas Book One of *Armies* recounts Mailer’s personal rite of passage, Book Two describes the collective rite of passage for America as a whole. The climactic section of *Armies* begins when Mailer, now off the scene himself, contemplates those young demonstrators in front of the Pentagon, “now engaged in that spiritual test so painful to all – the rite of passage” (AN 278). Making their protest and waiting for the answer, these demonstrators experience a passage through the cold, almost spooky night, as their mood is “pacifistic, almost saintly, but very weak” and as “the walls of the Pentagon bulked large” (AN 281). Still, this scene has its “romantic” possibilities, because the campfires “cannot be unreminiscent of other campfires in Washington and Virginia little more than a century ago” (AN 263). That is, a new “Civil War” is about to begin. As Mailer sees it, “this passage through the night was a rite of passage,” a kind of “echo of far greater rites of passage in American history,” so that “some hint of a glorious future may have hung in the air” (AN 279-80).

On placing this rite of passage in the historical, political, and romantic frames, Mailer reflects that “the country had been grounded on a rite of passage” since “each generation of Americans had forged their own rite” at Valley Forge, at Gettysburg, the Alamo, and Normandy, and now “these tender drug-vitiated jargon-mired children, they endured through a night,” making their “attack” on the Pentagon and holding “a testament before the most authoritative embodiment of the principle that America was right, America was might, America was the true religious war of Christ against the Communist” (AN 280). Earlier in the narrative, Mailer has stated that “it was the children in whom Mailer had some hope, a gloomy hope” (AN 34), meaning that the promise of America’s future is in those very youths who began their rite of passage by trying to exorcise the Pentagon with the hypnotic chant “Out, demons, out!” As Sylvia Adamson suggests, *The Armies of the Night* is a representative of “empathetic narrative,” in which

Mailer merges his individual perspective and consciousness with the group perspective and consciousness, making the demonstrators reflectors and centers of consciousness instead of anonymous masses (see 2001: 92). Thus Mailer, no longer a character participating in the event but rather an author-narrator imagining the scene, externally focalizes the feelings of the demonstrators, visualizing that “in the night, they were all close to each other. Quietly. They were waiting. The walls of the Pentagon bulked large” (AN 281). In Mailer’s figuration, despite the hopeless situation and the fear of terror, the night goes on and so “the moral ladder was climbed, they were forever different in the morning than they had been before the night, which is the meaning of a rite of passage” (AN 280). This “positive” rite of passage, in its combination of hope and depression, is strongly juxtaposed by Mailer with a “negative” rite of passage represented by a Pentagon spokesman, who is speaking in “language which succeeds in stripping itself of any moral content,” expressing Mailer’s belief that “men learn in a negative rite to give up the best things they were born with, and forever” (AN 284).³⁹

As his short visit in jail was a “rite of passage” for Mailer, making him “solid,” Mailer now contemplates a group of young Quakers who were arrested after the demonstration and who practiced noncooperation in prison, whereas for Mailer, Lowell, Chomsky and others the March on the Pentagon was primarily a “symbolic” act, as was their short sentence in jail. Now Mailer envisions “these naked Quakers on the cold floor of a dark isolation cell in D.C. jail,” figuring that “here was the last rite of passage, ‘*the chinook salmon... nosing up the impossible stone*’” (AN 287; my emphasis). The allegory created here suggests that the Quakers, in *their* rite of passage, need to face “the impossible stone” in order to reach their goal, and they have to climb their difficult “moral ladder.” This vision becomes clearer if we recall Lowell’s famous poem “Waking Early Sunday Morning.” The poem is first read aloud by the poet himself in the Ambassador Theater in front of an audience which potentially consists of these very youths now facing their rite:

³⁹ The spokesman’s “totalitarian” discourse – in the style of “we feel, [...] our action is consistent with objectives of security and control faced with varying levels of dissent” – representing the language of “Big Brother” (AN 281), is actually very much like the language of the Pharisees in that its rhetoric is formally rich but empty in content. As Jesus contemplates in *The Gospel According to the Son*: “Could he be the Master of the Book in this Great Temple? His manners were as subtle as his well-curled beard. And his speech was as handsome as his appearance. Yet his eyes were pale like the faded blue of the sky when the sky is white. So I did not trust him” (GAS 160).

O to break loose, like the chinook
 salmon jumping and falling back,
 nosing up the impossible
 stone and bone-crushing waterfall –
 raw-jawed, weak-fleshed there, stopped by ten
 steps of the roaring ladder, and then
 to clear the top on the last try,
 alive enough to spawn and die. (AN 45)

The same poem is later quoted by Mailer in the aftermath of the march (see AN 124), and now again in the context of the rite of passage. As Lowell's poem continues, it wishes "peace to our children when they fall / in small war on the heels of small / war" (AN 45). Rhetorically, Mailer poses questions: "Did they pray, these Quakers, for forgiveness of the nation?"; "who was to say they were not saints?"; "and who to say that the sins of America were not by their witness a tithe remitted?" (AN 287). At this point, Mailer's vision turns "imaginary," and his rhetoric is based on speculation, since there is a *possible* truth that these prayers were made; in any case, Mailer concludes his reflection upon history and the novel in this book with the words "*there are places no history can reach*" (AN 287; my emphasis). The last chapter of the book, "Metaphor Delivered," opens after these questions and can be read as a *prayer* rendered through the voice and experience of these Quakers, even though any attentive reader of the narrative may be willing to connect Mailer's own vision, voice, and ideology with those represented in "Metaphor Delivered." As the transformation, metamorphosis, or growth of Mailer himself is at the core of the narrative plot, in the final chapter this protagonist becomes invisible and America itself becomes the main character, "undergoing a transformation of character as a result of Vietnam" (Wenke 1987: 163). Earlier in the narrative, Mailer has "felt like a damn Quaker, which was no way for a revolutionary to feel, unless he was – *mark this conjunction* – going to consort with pacifists and draft-card burners" (AN 57; my emphasis). Obviously, the figures such as the jail, the prayer, the rite of passage, and Lowell's poetic lines make the connection between Mailer and the Quakers – as well as between the "old" revolutionary and the "young" ones – palpable.

We need to contextualize Mailer's rhetorically overblown final passage in order to see its meanings. According to Booth's reading, Mailer's "mixed" metaphors, where such figures as "military heroes," "saints," "leprous skin," "beauty," and "babe" are brought together, have been presented with sound and fury that may both amaze and amuse if read out of their specific context (1988: 333; cf. Phelan 1989: 196). Mailer typical use of "mixed metaphors"

is self-consciously reflected upon in the *Armies* itself: “[M]etaphors soon to be mixed – for the Novelist is slowing to a jog, and the Historian is all grip on the rein” (AN 220; my emphasis). Earlier in the narrative Mailer writes: “Like most *cloudy metaphors*, this served to get him home – there is nothing like the search for a *clear figure of speech* to induce gyrosopic intensity sufficient for the compass to work” (AN 82; my emphases). As Booth importantly argues, metaphor cannot be judged without reference to a context, and to him the most appropriate context seems to be Mailer’s own style and work, which provides interpretative complexities of its own.⁴⁰

Booth notes that in Mailer’s political world “all stabilities have already been lost” and “the armies of the establishment have destroyed our public life and left us groping in the fog they have created, with no hope except for an elusive, revolutionary birth” (1988: 334). He also suggests that both Mailer and Edmund Burke (in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*) present (and even create) possible, alternative worlds through the use of large macro-metaphors – as happens, for instance, in the “apocalyptic” ending of *The Armies of the Night*. This openness of the ending of *Armies* can also be seen in the open questions it leaves for the reader and in the interpretative possibilities it offers. Some historical events seem to be “apocalyptic” or “revolutionary” in the sense that they demand a poetic and metaphorical, even passionate and creative, treatment instead of a detached presentation of cold facts:

At the opposite extreme from such unconscious twistings we find worlds where metaphor becomes deliberate, expansive, and aggressive; serene skies suddenly turn threatening, lighting flashes reveal a *self-conscious artificer* – and soon we encounter whole thunderstorms, cascades, whirlpools, floods, maelstroms of metaphor – often with no more concern for surface harmony than I have just shown. *Those computer scientists live on the same planet, but not in the same ‘world,’* as the author of [...] ‘The Metaphor Delivered.’ (Booth 1988: 326; my emphases)

Mailer’s and Burke’s histories, according to Booth, work both on a historical-referential level and a mythical-metaphorical level, and myths and their reproduction also provide invaluable coherence models for human beings in our modern technological world. Mythological explanation, as presented through poetic language and narrative form, is a special form of human thinking, as Mailer seems to be suggesting; it is our way of making sense of things, even those things that are alien to us (like the moon or the

⁴⁰ It is as if the tone and voice of the ending of *Armies* is a logical consequence of the rhetorical development of the narrative: “Any reader who has followed Mailer to his final page will be offended if the speaker does *not* seem close to losing control; only shouting can do justice to the total vision Mailer wants to portray” (Booth 1988: 333-34).

universe). As suggested by Booth, “macro-level” metaphors can function as “mythic metaphors” or, in their largest form, as “cosmic myths.”

The subject of my next case study, *Of a Fire on the Moon*, Mailer’s metaphorical (and mythological) version of the first moon flight, contains Mailer’s creed that we should try to understand our universe as “poets” and use metaphor rather than measure as our “key.” This notion gives Mailer’s metaphorical approach a cosmic dimension.

Chapter IV

The 'Failure' of Art: Problems of Verbal and Visual Representation in Of a Fire on the Moon

As suggested by Mailer's complex practice in *The Armies of the Night*, his works of nonfiction often dramatize the failure of the historian/novelist to grasp the events happening in the real world. We may see that "failure" is often part of the meaning-making process that Mailer's nonfiction foregrounds: "[Mailer] makes explicit his failure, makes deliberate the enactment of failure as a way of figuring his subject" (Anderson 1987: 96). In this chapter I discuss Mailer's nonfictional practice in his most self-reflexive book, *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970), which discusses its own successes and failures in constructing a literary representation of the quintessentially mysterious American event, the first moon flight, executed by the Space Program and Apollo 11 in 1969. The focus of my analysis is especially on verbal and visual representation of the moon shot as reflected on by Mailer. I will show the way the author employs his characteristic poetic and mythological framework in order to make sense of the complex event.

Problems and Possibilities of Representation

It has been stated that what happened in modernism was that "mankind started dreaming in a different key," and in the arts this new 'key' "was determined by a widespread discovery – or, in some cases, rediscovery – of the medium as the message" (e.g., Brink 1998: 1). The concepts given here – such as 'dreaming,' 'key,' 'medium' and the 'message' – occur frequently

in *Of a Fire on the Moon*, and in the book's constant metadiscourse they are reflected upon as those metaphors or "materials" out of which the book is made. By linking the development of novelistic art with the breakthroughs in other art forms, André Brink argues that "[f]rom Cézanne onwards, painting turns its back on a long tradition of 'truth to nature' as it begins to focus on the materiality of paint on canvas" (ibid.). Cézanne, one of the founding fathers of modernist art, is relevant in this context, since Mailer discusses his art, his use of paint as a language, to exemplify some problems and possibilities of representation in *Of a Fire on the Moon*.

Representation and the Reflection on Artistic Failure

Broadly speaking, in traditional notions of representation a sign was understood as imitating or mirroring reality. According to such views, there is a direct relation between words and things, and consequently words become "a transparent channel to an extralinguistic outside" (Rimmon-Kenan 1996: 7). These traditional views conceive of language as a reproduction of a prior presence, conflating 'representation' with realistic 'mimesis.' To take one example of the power and influence of "realistic representation," we may think of the creation of the Renaissance perspective in painting, where the painters "began to re-present the aspects of the world from a single, arbitrary, and implicitly changeable position and thereby to construct a world with one single vanishing point: in other words, a world with common coordinates that apply universally regardless of position" (Ermarth 1998: 1073). Since the Renaissance, almost all painting had obeyed a strong convention, that of one-point perspective, but in modernist art like Cubism, as developed by Picasso and Braque, the world is perceived from different angles simultaneously, and consequently our view of objects of reality becomes both complex and fragmented. As compared to modernist art and world-view (which appear to be interconnected), realism seeks the value of neutrality where various possible viewpoints are formally combined.

In Nelson Goodman's formulation, in his *Languages of Art*, in order to represent an object a picture must be a symbol for it, stand for it, and refer to it. However, a picture "never merely represents *x*, but rather represents *x* as a man or represents *x* to be a mountain" (Goodman 1976 [1968]: 9). To represent something always involves a difficulty, for "the world is not accurately or otherwise reflected in the mirror of language" but "meaning is produced within language, [...] by the practice, the 'work' of representation" (Hall 1997: 28). It is also at the core of the mimetic theory of represen-

tation that there is an ontological difference between “prior” or “original” reality and the mimetic artifact (verbal or visual), and thus the work of art is always something “other” than the reality it aims to depict. It may be argued, then, that representation does not amount to imitation in the sense of mimetic realism: “Imitation is dependent on a prior reality; representation is not dependent on a world of objects, but productive of their meaning and value” (Doody 1998: 20). Thus representation belongs inherently to artistic creativity, to making something new and coherent, not simply producing a picture which derives directly from reality. In a strict sense, no text (be it fictional or nonfictional) is a simple and direct imitation of the outside world, and we may illuminate this thought by referring to realistic painting, photography, or documentary film, which are representations rather than imitations of the world.¹

Postmodernism or poststructuralism are often associated with theories of nonrepresentationality. In post-Saussurean linguistics the incapacity of language to reach the world has resulted in the discussions of *impossibility* of representation, producing philosophical claims according to which language and literature are creations rather than re-creations of reality (see Rimmon-Kenan 1996: 8, 11). Thomas Docherty, however, argues that some notion of representation is crucial to deconstruction, especially its Derridean mode (see 1996: 117). What art clearly emphasizes is that the representation and its referent are two different things, that they cannot be in the same place, and finally that the representation may even be the opposite to its seeming referent, some object in “the real world.” The concept of *re*-presentation in a way supposes, and includes in itself, an idea of the world of objects, on the one hand, and their presentations in a new way in language and in art, on the other. Again, the postmodernist claim according to which language *makes* or *creates* reality and its objects appears problematic. One example given by Goodman in his *Ways of Worldmaking* concerns the creation of “stars” in language, and this idea corresponds to Goodman’s theory, in his earlier *Languages of Art*, that world-versions are symbolic systems created by symbolic language. However, “[i]mposing an organization on pre-existing things is not quite like creating things themselves” (Lamarque & Olsen 1994: 212). In this sense stars are pre-existing things which are only made meaningful in symbolic language and representation; the same is true of the moon in *Of a Fire on the Moon*.

¹ Kendall Walton’s claim, made in his well-known study *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, that all mimetic representation is *fiction* (e.g., “Pictures are fiction by definition” [1990: 351]) is problematized by Marie-Laure Ryan’s view that “mentally producing a more or less vivid image of situations is an integral part of the reading of *mimetic nonfiction*, since it is on the basis of this image that we evaluate the truth of the propositions asserted by the text” (2001: 110-11; my emphasis).

On a certain level, there appears to be a crucial difference between visual and verbal representation. The linguistic sign, as defined by Saussure, does not refer to the objects of the world, and thus the word 'moon' has no *natural* relation to any object, for this relationship is purely *arbitrary*, culturally constructed. Mailer accordingly ponders "that moon (whose name was *Mond* in German, even if *monde* was the word for 'world' in French, [...] that moon called *maan* and *maane* in Dutch and Danish)" (FM 386). Thus the type of sign used in verbal or linguistic representation is usually *symbolic* (having an arbitrary relation to its referent or object of representation) as opposed to *iconic* (which resembles the referent). An icon shares, through resemblance, some traits with whatever it signifies (see Steiner 1995: 76). The difference between, for example, a painting and a written text is, then, that "while paintings depict iconically, words signify conventionally" (Ryan 2001: 107). We may note that visual artifacts differ from written texts in various ways: a painting is not made out of words but of "visual images constructed in paint on a surface for apprehension primarily through sight" (Widdowson 1999: 122). Nevertheless, though interart or intersemiotic studies focus on the differences between verbal and visual "languages," they also chart "a permanent dialogue and exchange between visual and verbal practices" (Grishakova 2002: 546). While an *image* is not a *text*, "the visual and the verbal domains interpenetrate, influence, and inform each other" (Bal 1991: 19). As it has been argued, both writers and visual artists create their work from within the same cultural setting and therefore express the dominant concerns of their time. Artistic production is not conscious throughout; 'intersemiotic' modes of art often reflect the larger cultural unconsciousness (cf. Roston 2000: 9). In Mieke Bal's words, "the culture in which works of art and literature emerge and function does not impose a strict distinction between the verbal and visual domain," and while literature and the visual arts represent different ways of producing signs and meanings, those ways are still not opposed to each other, and even the modes of interpretation we use when "reading" verbal or visual art are basically similar activities (see 1991: 5, 9, 17). Verbality is not necessarily logocentric and visuality is not necessarily imagocentric; neither of them is tied to a particular medium (literature, painting). Therefore, "an iconology of the text must also consider the problem of reader response, the claim that some readers visualize and that some texts encourage or discourage mental imaging" (Mitchell 1994: 112). Obviously, literary texts are only metaphorically visual, but they may encourage "visual reading" by constructing visual spaces and perspectives and by containing direct allusions to visual art, be it painting or cinema.

Art is conscious of and critical toward previous conventions but also toward its own current conventions. Apparently, the artist's exploration of his or her medium and the possibilities of artistic representation is one of the characteristic features of twentieth century modernism. Thus "there is no better way of defining the achievement of Picasso, Stravinsky or Eliot than to say that it is an exploration both of the medium in which they are working and of the traditional exploration of that medium" (Josipovici 1971: xiv).² Modernism appears to represent far-reaching changes in both verbal and visual arts, and comparisons have been made between the abstract forms of Cubism (e.g., Picasso) and the representation of consciousness in modernist fiction (e.g., Joyce). Brink compares two primary works symbolizing modernism, Joyce's novel *Ulysses* (1922) and Picasso's painting *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907), which draw attention to the use of tool and medium (see Brink 1998: 4). In Picasso's groundbreaking painting of five female nudes, the spectator's attention is drawn to abstract figures and forms and to the striking fact that this "masterpiece" has not been completed; it has white blanks with no paint. Picasso's work foregrounds the problems of its own formal composition while simultaneously trying to sever its links to previous artistic conventions. In that painting the above-mentioned ideal of "realistic representation," the Renaissance space, is self-consciously subverted, and the stylistic discontinuity and spatial inconsistency of Picasso's work – with its sources in Cézanne and in African, Iberian, and Egyptian art – suggests a stark contrast to the logical coherence implied by Renaissance space (see Gaggi 1997: 16-17, 19). A landmark of modernist art, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* also interests Mailer, who, in his *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man*, writes that in the composition of this work Picasso "now had to show what could be done with form – even more, *the destruction of form*, at least as everyone understood it" (PPYM 243; my emphasis).

By comparing Picasso's art of painting to Joyce's art of the novel especially as it is exploded in *Finnegans Wake* (PPYM 310), Mailer's proceeds to his own, more or less mystical thesis about Picasso's own divided personality. The artist's divided aesthetics/personality can be grasped in Picasso's most famous work, which is itself divided into two parts and can strike one as "gnomic, repellent": "[Picasso] set out to do one thing and changed his mind in the middle, and he never did figure out how to unify the two halves

² In fact, since Cervantes and Sterne, novels have always been "conscious" of their form and medium, and sometimes worked "strenuously – and ultimately unsuccessfully – against the medium in which they were conceived" (Douglas 2000: 52). On the other hand, "the novel, more than any other literary medium, has always managed to transform and recombine its inherited materials so as to express a reality perceived as multiple, complex, and threatening to our humanity" (Tabbi 1995: 178).

of the work" (PPYM 250). In that complex painting, the influence of both Cézanne and of African sculpture is apparent in its fragmented forms and unprecedented distortions; furthermore, the work can be interpreted as a "battlefield," containing traits and evidence of Picasso's internal and aesthetic struggle in his venture toward modernization of art. There is some similarity in Picasso's "schizophrenic" aesthetics to that of Mailer in his moon book, which is divided into three parts which try to make a whole. When discussing Picasso's *Demaiselles* Mailer speaks of "the great dichotomy in the canvas, that gaping hole" (PPYM 260), while his moon book is metaphorically like a triptych, a three-part painting trying to bring its separate parts and its two "separate" writers (Mailer and Aquarius) together.

As suggested above, the modernist or postmodernist conception of art often implies a sense of *failure* in the production and composition of a work that, at least on some level, aims at the representation of "reality." In Colin Falck's words, since Romanticism we have been inclined to mark off a category of artistic failure in our critical language: "The formal failure is a failure, and furthermore *matters*, we tend to argue, because it fails to secure any coherent meaning or comprehension of truth within what purports to be the order of a single artistic work" (1989: 75). As Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan suggests, "the despair that arises from confronting the incapacity of language to 'reach' the world is sometimes counteracted by a search for a metalinguistic place from which to speak of the limitations of language and literature," and "this results in metatexts, self-conscious or self-referential literature, works that interrogate or dramatize *their own difficulties in representing reality*" (1996: 12; my emphasis). We may note, for example, that Faulkner himself referred to *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) as a "failure" because it had not, as it were, reached all its ambitious goals; however, that novel is also "a most splendid failure," showing in its self-reflexivity "a never-completed quest for form and meaning" (Bleikasten 1976: 48, 51). Faulkner reflected on failure as the very destiny of all artistic endeavor: the process of literary production can never find its final completion. Even more radically, Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* (1947) has been – just like Picasso's painting – seen as a "monster" which could not be loved. That novel is sometimes seen as "put together" through a process of artificial composition, "torture" of language, and "excessive borrowing," and still regarded as a "great" book: "[i]t is a part of the mystery of art that a work of art can be full of faults" (Hollingdale 1971: 45). If we understand that certain modernist and postmodernist art works are self-reflexive to the extent that the "failure" to succeed is written inside them, we may see that the question and problem of artistic and linguistic representation belongs to

the *intentional* composition of the work (as R.J. Hollingdale also suggests in his discussion of Mann's book). However, as Picasso's *Demoiselles* – the work of modernist art – famously suggests (and as Mailer himself notes), problems of composition and representation may remain unsolved: a work of art never attains its goals, whatever those goals may be.

In this context, we may also note Mailer's idiosyncratic manner of implying the failure of the book in question, concomitantly implying the failure in the writer's personality as well.³ *Of a Fire on the Moon* is an example of a narrative text which seems to include its self-negation, very much in the manner of "radical irony" as suggested by Ihab Hassan in his discussion of postmodernist art:

Silence in the new literature is also attained through radical irony – a term I apply to any statement that contains its own ironic denial. The Cretan who claimed all Cretans were liars may serve as an example; the machine of Tinguely, which has no other function but to destroy itself, serves as another. Radical irony, in other words, requires not a collage of found objects, but an empty canvas. In recent times, [...] radical irony has increased in sophistication. More concretely, Mailer's *An American Dream* frankly burlesques, and actually denies, the novel form by transforming it into pop art. (1987: 9)

In another context, Hassan also regards Mailer as a "representative figure of our time" who needs to turn from fiction to fact, from novel to pop, reflecting in his work the failure of the modern novelist to grasp the large social vision with the help of traditional means (see 1982: 253). However, *An American Dream*, being Hassan's example in the paragraph above, may appear to be somewhat less complicated when compared to Mailer's non-fiction. As I would argue, this "reflexive" technique, with its ironical "self-destruction," may produce obvious differences in nonfiction as compared to fiction. As seen in Chapter II, Mailer often leaves his fictional narrators and protagonists on the "threshold" of producing the book that they have been attempting to write throughout the actual narrative, a 'novel' which may or may not be the novel we are reading. As mentioned above, the most striking example of this recognition and reflection in Mailer's nonfiction appears at the end of *The Prisoner of Sex*, where the author seems to abandon this form ('nonfiction') when dealing with the over-complex issues of sex and love. In *Of a Fire on the Moon* the word "failure" occurs frequently in various

³ Suffice it to refer here to the psychoanalytical discussion according to which failure is not necessarily a psychological problem but an almost natural condition, inherently belonging to a sense of incomplete human identities: "[U]pon a gap, a fissure, a point of irreconcilability in the self, our incomplete identities rest. That we fail to be whole underpins what is interesting about the psychoanalytical model of the subject [...]. 'Failure', then, is not a problem but a condition of subjectivity" (Williams 1995: 186).

contexts. Of course, this kind of self-negating and reflection on failure does not necessarily produce a *literary* failure, but, at least potentially, a new kind of achievement.⁴

The Unreality of Reality

Postmodernist art often foregrounds its problematization of the representation of reality:

[H]istoriographic metafiction – like postmodern painting, sculpture, and photography – inscribes and only then subverts its mimetic engagement with the world. It does not reject it [...]; nor does it merely accept it [...]. But it does change irrevocably any simple notions of realism or reference by directly confronting the discourse of art with the discourse of history. (Hutcheon 1988: 20)

When discussing *The Education of Henry Adams* (one of the implied subtexts of both *Armies* and *Fire*), Hayden White suggests that any text can be read, in principle, as a mediation on the impossibility of representation, since “any text attempting to grasp any reality through the medium of language or to represent it in that medium raises the specter of the impossibility of the task undertaken” (1987: 206). Thus, according to T.V. Reed, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a book which contains prose by James Agee and photographs by Walker Evans, represents “novel journalism that calls its own representational practices into question,” and the book’s “questioning of representational capacities within each of the two media [the prose and the photos] is intensified by comparative cross-mediation” (1992: 35, 39). Written mainly *against* the conventions of the genre inside which it is produced – the thirties documentaries of rural life and their claim to give the reader a “real” picture of that life – Agee and Evans’s book aims at shaking the readers’ preconceptions by problematizing the relationship between a verbal/visual text and the harsh realities of the actual world. By juxtaposing text and photographs, Agee and Evans’s work discusses its own shortcomings in “realistic” representation of poor families in the American countryside while simultaneously foregrounding itself as an artifact (Agee even wants to put bits and pieces of wood, fabric, and excrement on the

⁴ As André Bleikasten puts it when discussing Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, “in its very failure the novel succeeds,” for “even though the gap between text and meaning is always there, the writing process manages to create an order of its own” (1976: 205). A similar idea is provided for example by Ted Hughes’s self-referential poetry, where the recognition of language’s failure to reach its referent in reality in no way means that poems fail *as poems* (see Bentley 1998: 52).

page to stress the “materials” out of which this book *and* this reality is made). In Reed’s words, while “*Praise* at once attempts to bleed the book into reality and to transfigure reality into text (that is, into a self-conscious aesthetic construct),” it simultaneously “injects doubt about any text’s ability to achieve immediacy by drawing attention to conventions (including conventions of immediacy) active in the text/world” (ibid.: 31). In its preface, the text touches on its methods and tools: “The immediate instruments are two: the motionless camera, and the printed word”; “[w]e are trying to deal with [our subject] not as journalists, sociologists, politicians, entertainers, humanitarians, priests, or artists, but *seriously*” (Agee & Evans 1988 [1941]: xlvii-xlviii; my emphasis). The juxtaposition of the prose and the photos, with their equal inability to reach the real, enhances the critical self-reflexivity of the book.

Agee and Evans’s book uses existing conventions against themselves, being “anti-artistic,” “anti-scientific,” and “anti-journalistic.” It reflects on its *nonfictionality* yet also on its failure to be “true.” In the reflexive acknowledgment of the role of his subjectivity, Agee acknowledges both his own limitations and the indeterminacy of a world whose conceptualization resists critical closure (see Hartsock 2000: 185; cf. Zavarzadeh 1976: 71). There is some “actual” subject outside this text, namely the reality of the tenant farmers, and while the verbal/visual text shapes that actual subject, the text itself is shaped by that actuality. There is, then, a kind of double bind in textual representation; representations cannot be avoided, but they ultimately always fail. As Agee writes: “*Failure*, indeed, is almost as strongly an obligation as an inevitability, in [this] work” (Agee & Evans 1988 [1941]: 238n). Reed notes how *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* offers “richly textured pastiches of and allusions to a vast array of ‘aesthetic’ styles – impressionism, expressionism, surrealism, cubism, imagism, and naturalism” (1992: 35). In addition to the actual presence of Evans’s photographs, Agee self-consciously alludes to various other media, including film, music, drama, and painting, thus opening the text to multiple readings and building “a sense of reality as a kind of total art form built of a cubist arrangement of media that have been artificially subdivided into a multitude of conventional genres” (ibid.: 41). Occasionally Agee’s prose emphasizes that reality is seen through “two different techniques or mediums,” so that “what began as ‘rembrandt,’ [...] has become a photograph” (Agee & Evans 1988 [1941]: 404). The object in question seems to require a specific artistic medium (or, to be exact, an allusion to it), and, accordingly, Agee refers to the devices and conventions used in literature, journalism, film, music, photography, and painting. What links *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to Mailer’s *Of*

a *Fire on the Moon* particularly closely is Agee's explicit allusion to the colors and forms of Cézanne, and even the mention of Cézanne may connect Agee's text to Cubism.

In "A Harlot High and Low," his essay dealing with the Watergate affair, Mailer writes: "The nature of the difficulty begins to disclose itself. We cannot construct an explanation. We do not know which of our facts are bricks and which are papier-mâché painted to look like bricks. We can only watch the way the bricks are handled" (PAP 178). In the same essay, which is probably Mailer's most theoretically interesting speculation on "the epistemology of facts," as he calls it, he refers to the different "levels" of distorted and mosaic reality in our media-centered age:

If half the pieces in a jigsaw puzzle are missing, the likelihood is that something can still be put together. Despite its gaps, the picture may be more or less visible. Even if most of the pieces are gone, a loose mosaic can be arranged of isolated elements. The possibility of the real picture being glimpsed under such circumstances is small but not altogether lost. It is just that one would like to know if the few pieces left belong to the same set.

Maybe it is the splinters of a mirror rather than the scattered pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that provide a superior ground for the metaphor. *We are dealing not with reality*, after all, but that image of reality which reaches the surface through the cracked looking glass of the media. (PAP 179; my emphasis)

As Mas'ud Zavarzadeh suggests, "the real merges with the fantastic, and the blend approaches the surrealism that Norman Mailer believes to be our new reality." Most dramatically in cases like the Watergate affair, "[t]he 'facts' of the matter, as narrated by witness after witness, did not yield themselves to any familiar code of reality; they seemed more like elements of a perverse fantasy, as if 'someone had been planning to write a book'" (1976: 24). In *St. George and the Godfather*, written just before the Watergate affair is exposed, Mailer is seeking a "narrative" in the middle of this warped reality and media simulation, pondering how to transform separate mediated facts into a literary work.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men makes the reader unsure as to where the book itself begins (with the photographs, the narrative text, or the "Preface" placed between them?) and where it ends. In addition to this formal complexity, "[t]he fictive and the factual are as distinct in *Praise* as the two sides of a Möbius strip" (Reed 1992: 35). As Docherty suggests, some texts end, paradoxically and Möbius-like, at the very point where they can begin to be written (see 1996: 128). In *St. George and the Godfather*, through the near-sighted eyes of Aquarius, his alter ego "created" in *Fire*, Mailer sees that reality is like a Möbius strip. This kind of vision becomes clear, so to speak,

when the perceiving subject is “inside” the happenings instead of being only a detached, “objective” reporter:

What a secret domain in the midst of open convention! Moving around a ring made of a strip of paper, one finds oneself first on the outside, then on the inside. Since one has not quit one’s plane, it must be a twisted ring. *History has moved from a narrative line to a topological warp.* (SGG 35; my emphasis)

This “topological warp” is already the experience of Aquarius’s first incarnation in *Of a Fire on the Moon*, with his (and metonymically Mailer’s) more or less paranoid sense that perhaps everything surrounding the moon flight is made up and thus unreal.

There is a kind of break in modernist art which sees the reality and the world as unstable and “moving,” being viewed from various viewpoints simultaneously. In the age of the moving cinema of Griffith and the Cubist painting of Picasso, as well as the relativist physics of Einstein (all developed before the end of the first decade of the twentieth century), the objects of the world are no longer understood as “fixed” entities to be perceived by an observing ego from some solid position, as in Descartes’ philosophy. Marina Grishakova suggests that “[a]s compared to the Cartesian rational, detached and disembodied subject, the modernist observer is actively involved in the interaction with the world and is seen as a part of reality, through which reality manifests itself” (2002: 530). In the preface to *Some Honorable Men*, Mailer metaphorically juxtaposes “objective” journalism and “subjective” fiction, or the world-views of Descartes and Einstein:

Journalism assumes the truth of an event can be found by the use of principles that go back to Descartes. (A political reporter has a *fixed view of the world*; you may plot it on axes that run right to left on the horizontal and down from honesty to corruption on the vertical.) Indeed, the real premise of journalism is that the best instrument for measuring history is a faceless, even a mindless, recorder. Whereas the writer of fiction is closer to *the moving world* of Einstein. There, the velocity of the observer is as crucial to the measurement as any object observed, [...]. So our best chance of improving those private charts of our own most complicated lives, our unadmitted maps of reality – our very comprehension, if you will, of the way existence works – seems to profit us most if we can have some little idea, at least, of *the warp of the observer* who passes on the experience. (SHM xi; my emphases)⁵

⁵ We may note that here Mailer is not simply disposing of the merits of “objective” and “factual” journalism: “I thought fiction could bring us closer to the truth than journalism, *which is not to say one should make up facts when writing a story about real people.* I would endeavor to get my facts as scrupulously as a reporter. (At the least!)” (SHM xi; my emphasis). As Mailer stresses in the same context, “the difference” he wants to emphasize here concerns the different world-views of fiction and journalism, so that “the world – *not the techniques but the world* – of fiction could be brought into journalism” (SHM ix; my emphasis). We may compare Mailer’s stance to that of Wolfe, who wants precisely to introduce the techniques of fiction into journalism.

One of the “mysteries” surrounding the 1972 Republican convention, as described in *St. George and the Godfather*, is obviously the presence and influence of television, for in the representation of the convention by TV, “perhaps a new genre was being created – Soap Opera Sublime” (SGG 9). Actually, it is with the help of television that Mailer-Aquarius (like so many other Americans) may gain some sense of the complex reality happening at the moment (“Aquarius and other of the Press had studied the TV set like primitives looking at reflections in a pond of water”), actively seeking “to read significance” into each image on the screen (see SGG 9). What Mailer-Aquarius suggests, however, is that television is bound to represent the reality of the event as a flat, depthless phenomenon, for “the old-fashioned demonstration was too hot a phenomenon for the cool shades of TV.” Television could not bear too abrupt shifts of narrative line and tone; “[n]o more could it tolerate a series of images which progressed to no development” (SGG 64-65). However, as the conventions are proceeding both within and without television, a kind of ontological uncertainty emerges in Aquarius’s mind. Aquarius then concludes that “history had become a crystal ball whose image shivered so erratically one had to wonder if a TV set was transmitting the image or the underworld of crystal balls was in convulsion” (SGG 70). In “A Harlot High and Low” Mailer points out that “we have preferred to rely on the testimony of a hundred skilled and professional liars rather than face into *a vision of reality* which would recognize that *Franz Kafka is the true if abstract historian of the modern age, and the Möbius strip is the nearest surface we can find to a plane*” (PAP 203; my emphases).

In his attempt to deal with one of the extreme (post)modernist events of our time in *Of a Fire on the Moon*, Mailer faces the dream-like and mysterious unreality of this media spectacle. When Aquarius, Mailer’s “surrogate” in the story, sees the first moon shot on the TV screen, he has to reflect upon the possibility that it is *fiction*, or at least a skillfully rendered conspiracy. It appears that a “postmodern” poet lacks T.S. Eliot’s modernist ideal, the “objective correlative”:

The event was so removed, however, so unreal, that no objective correlative existed to prove it had not conceivably been an event staged in a television studio – the greatest con of the century – and indeed a good mind, product of the iniquities, treacheries, gold, passion, invention, deception, and rich worldly stink of the Renaissance could hardly deny that the event if bogus was as great a creation in mass hoodwinking, deception, and legerdemain as the true ascent was in discipline and technology. Indeed, conceive of the genius of such conspiracy (FM 130).

The idea of the Space Program as a “postmodern narrative” is thus present in Mailer’s book (see Atwill 1994: 99-100). In addition, Mailer concludes that this is “a century which looked to explain the psychology of the dream, and instead entered the topography of the dream,” and “the real had become more fantastic than the imagined” (FM 114). Mailer is envisioning here a space where, as in *St. George and the Godfather*, history has moved from a narrative line into a topological warp, where reality looks like fantasy and the only art form possible is “the art of the absurd” (FM 115). This contemplation can be connected with Mailer’s meta-nonfictional criticism: he disapproves of perceiving reality as a paranoid fantasy, as a dream and nightmare, as if our only way of representing the world were the art of the absurd (see CC 128-29).

These questions become more complicated, however, if we perceive the practice of Mailer’s meta-nonfiction, and we may even contemplate what kind of “topological warp” *Mailer* is constructing here. *Of a Fire on the Moon* seems to problematize both the factuality and fictionality of the historical event of the moon shot and thus proceeds to construct a kind of “fictional/nonfictional” plane or *space*. Like the Vietnam War or the Watergate affair, the first moon flight (belonging to the same age and cultural context) is a bewildering experience, a happening “created” by television and the newspapers. But the event also creates an epistemological, perhaps even ontological uncertainty, being so new, fanciful, and unbelievable. As readers, we are not at ease when facing this kind of meta-nonfictional “labyrinthine strategy” (cf. Lehman 2001: 339; 1997: 179, 183), for there is no sure and absolute ground that the text’s representation is factual. Still, we can no more easily enjoy its fictionality, for there is a real world with real people that the text relates to.

Writing about the Writing about the Moon Flight

Of a Fire on the Moon appears to Chris Anderson as the most representative of Mailer’s nonfictional narratives because it is his most explicitly meta-discursive and self-reflexive work. As he notes, “rather than write about his subject, [Mailer] writes about his writing about the subject,” and “[t]he process of writing the book becomes the subject of the book” (1987: 92). The *mise en abyme* structure which presents the writing of the book as the main “plot” of the book also draws the reader into a reflexive reading. In *Fire* Mailer makes explicit that he has an arrangement, or even a kind of mission, to write about the moon flight, while he also acknowledges the

difficulty of doing it. The reason for the writer's pain and frustration, deeply felt in *Fire*, is, largely, that the media and the computer have taken over literary prose and poetry. This ultimately poses the question concerning the role and importance of "the novelist" in our time.

Mailer as Aquarius

Of a Fire on the Moon begins with Mailer's identification of himself as "Aquarius" and with his reflection that "we approach our subject via Aquarius [...] because he is a detective of sorts" and because "he has learned to live with questions" (FM 4). Mailer-Aquarius later notes that "he felt as if he had begun the study of a new world so mysterious to his detective's heart (all imaginative novelists, by this logic, are detectives)" (FM 15).⁶ The name "Aquarius" evokes an appropriate "medium" for this very book. Mailer believes that it is "the perfect name for a man who would begin the study of rockets," since Aquarius's, of the water-bearer's, *medium* consists of three elements, solid, liquid, and gas, which "was kin to the rocket" (FM 6). In addition to these philosophical ruminations, there is a more practical side to the writing of the "moon book" as well. Newspaper headlines had stated in advance that "he would receive a million dollars for doing a book about the astronauts"; thus it was "not so bad. He had only to write a book about the moon shot. Small matter" (FM 6). Except that it will not be a small matter; quite soon he faces complicated questions and "this grim tough job of writing" (FM 48). Mailer's ambivalent double attitude toward the moon mission is partly reflected in the fact that the complex and sometimes incoherent reflections of Aquarius on the story level are not always directly representative of Mailer's own ideologies. Rather – as in *The Armies of the Night* – there is a possible discrepancy between the character-focalizer's "filter" and the author-narrator's "slant."

⁶ In a similar vein, Mailer begins his smaller book *The Faith of Graffiti* (1974) – about the graffiti art in New York, with photographs by Jon Naar – by stating that "journalism is chores" and "journalism is bondage," and qualifying this by "unless you can see yourself as a private eye inquiring into the mysteries of a new phenomenon" (FG 5). As this kind of "detective" work is, under Mailer's pen, also self-conscious artistic practice, he reflects that "you may even become an *Aesthetic Investigator* ready to take up your role in the twentieth-century mystery play" (FG 5; my emphasis). In his characteristic style, Mailer adopts a new name and narrative voice for "this piece," this time in the style of graffiti artists themselves: "Aesthetic Investigator! Make the name A-I for this about graffiti. [...] A-I is talking to CAY 161" (FG 5). The prose text of "The Faith of Graffiti" is also reprinted in the collections *Pieces and Pontifications* (PAP 134-58) and *The Time of Our Time* (TOT 880-902).

In a sense, “Mailer-Aquarius” has both a visible and an invisible persona, hovering between the strongly autobiographical presence of “Mailer” in *The Armies of the Night* and the apparently disembodied narrative voice of *The Executioner’s Song*. However, by resuming his third-person narrative mode and using it as a consciously rhetorical device, Mailer is able to be simultaneously “inside” and “outside” the technological event of the moon flight, simultaneously participating in it and representing it. As Joseph Tabbi suggests, Mailer’s strategy is similar to that of Henry Adams, whose *Education* functions as a subtext here as well as in *Armies*: “For Adams, writing at the dawn of twentieth-century modernity, third-person narrative was a way to regain his own place and imaginative coherence in a universe of forces that tended to exclude him” (1995: 37). In fact, Mailer’s confrontation with the space program and the Apollo rocket strongly resembles Adams’s confrontation with the dynamo in the Great Exhibition of 1900 (see Taylor 1983: 2-5). However, what is needed is a language that can grasp the dimensions of an event as big and complex as the first moon flight. In a way, “[o]nly computers, only an abstract language of mathematical symbols, can encompass such complexity,” but Mailer still “wants to see in the space program a poetry of the human spirit,” and while the event itself is complex, Mailer’s “stylistic response to this material is equally complex” (Anderson 1987: 84, 88).

In his metadiscourse Mailer-Aquarius makes explicit the difficulties of writing, stating that “[e]vents were developing *a style and structure* almost impossible to write about [...] a process was taking place that was too complex to be reported for daily news stories” (FM 88). Mainstream journalism must feel its defeat, since “the relation of [their] news stories to the complex truth of this moon shot” (FM 88) is marked by a great gap; thus Mailer-Aquarius feels that “[c]omputers could have written [the reporter’s] pieces” (FM 88). In Aquarius’s rather ironical observation before the first press conference held by the astronauts, there are “several hundred *media tools (human)* all perplexed and worried at their journalistic ability to grasp more than the bare narrative of what was coming up” (FM 22; my emphasis). Furthermore, inability of the press to deal with the moon shot “was the signature of the century. Soon newspapers would be qualified to write only about fashion, theater, murder, movies, marriage and divorce” (FM 89). Because of the plurality and of questions, which “would only open into deeper questions” (FM 90), Aquarius feels his identity as a writer almost collapsing: “Aquarius felt chopped into fragments” (FM 94). The event is too complex to “fit in advance into some part of one’s picture of the world” (FM 105); therefore Aquarius almost admits that “the best way to do this

damnable story was probably to go home and cover the works by television" (FM 106). Mailer as Aquarius, writing about the writing about the moon flight, is shown reading manuals, looking for usable metaphors, and ultimately we grasp a picture of the author Mailer "sitting in a kitchen chair, reading by a lamp" (FM 143), being "a little more ready to head for home, the writing of a book" (FM 152). As noted in Chapter II, the image of the writer beside his or her writing desk is a figural point where both metafiction and "meta-nonfiction" make their textual production explicit and visible.

The self-consciousness of writing and the reflexivity of literary production is obvious to the reader on the macrostructural level of *Fire*, but such self-reflexivity can be found on the textual microlevel as well. As Anderson argues, Mailer prose sometimes appears "deliberately awkward and artificial, as if calling attention to itself as language," and thus "the language refers to itself and to the writer in the act of thinking through the problem of language" (1987: 89). This turning inwards to expression, to a specific rhetorical use of language and discourse, is a typical feature of Mailer's prose. It can be seen in such formulations as "one would have to create," "it would be good to recognize," or "we will be trying to comprehend." Mailer is here speaking about his own attempts to deal with something in language; thus he also draws his reader's attention to creation, recognizing, and conceptualization. According to Anderson, Mailer is "explicit in his recording of the process, calling attention to himself as a writer in the act of composing" and "his interest is in portraying what he later calls '*the style of his thoughts*'" (ibid.: 91; my emphasis; see FM 150). Mailer willingly admits his readers inside his consciousness, allowing them "to observe him making mistakes and energetically correcting them" (Landow 1986: 146). For example, when Mailer, through Aquarius, first visualizes the rocket "pursued by flames," he immediately corrects his impression: "*No*, it was more dramatic than that. For the flames were enormous" (FM 99; my emphasis). Thus the above-mentioned verbal self-reflections (such as "one would have to create") are the author's contemplations of his writing process rather than of its subject matter; they reflect the very style of his thought. In comparison, the character (Aquarius) feels, sees, and thinks on the story level; he is the focalizer who watches the launching of the rocket "through the lens of the binoculars" (FM 101). We may follow his thought processes complete with figures of speech: "[Y]es now the rocket looked like a thin and pointed witch's hat, and the flames from its base were the blazing eyes of the witch"; "*now it seemed* to rise like a ball of fire, like a new sun mounting the sky, a flame elevating itself" (FM 101; my emphases).

The ending of the book foregrounds, again, the difficulty of writing the book. However, it is not only a question of finding the right words and ways of representing the moon flight, but also that of the personal melancholy and depression that Aquarius feels. Not only the media, but the actual force behind the moon shot, NASA, had “a narrowness of vision” which “lost all register of *the true complexity of the event*” (FM 387; my emphases). Aquarius (or Mailer) thus senses not only the failure of his writing but the failure of his personal life, for he and his wife “had met on a night of full moon, and would end in the summer of the moon” (FM 436). His hometown Provincetown “was like a province of the moon in these days of a moon-crazy summer through which he was obliged to work” (FM 457). Instead of meeting the astronauts after their return to the earth, Aquarius is “forced to see the end of the mission on television” (FM 443). Writing becomes “suffering” under a “bad mood,” as if “passing through a swamp at midnight,” facing the approaching deadline; ultimately “[i]t was a terror to write if one wished to speak of important matters and did not know if one was qualified” (FM 435). Now that the flight is completed, Aquarius feels that he must have failed just because he could not participate in the moon shot: “What did it matter if one were not anywhere but on the moon for this story?” (FM 460). Even on the last pages of the narrative Aquarius is seeking for a form for his book: “Prose was never so much prose as when constructed with obligation” (FM 467); “For *the moon book* which he had begun that summer idled now in the gap of Pisces’ [the wife’s] absence, and he did not know where to put his feet” (FM 470; my emphasis). This scene can be autobiographically linked to the beginning of Mailer’s next book, *The Prisoner of Sex*, in which he reflects how “his battered not-so-firm ego was obliged to be installed in Provincetown through a long winter to go through the double haul of writing a book about the first landing on the moon while remaking himself out of the loss of a fourth wife” (PS 9).⁷

In *Of a Fire on the Moon*, Mailer’s “metadiscursive self-dramatization” is shown in that he “often tells the story of his effort to word the wordless; unable to describe the event itself, he describes himself in the act of description” (Anderson 1987: 89). This distribution of emphasis is rooted in Mailer-Aquarius’s sense that events were developing a style and structure almost impossible to write about. Aquarius undergoes a transformation in

⁷ This connection between two works obviously exemplifies the fact, discussed above, that the “worlds” of nonfiction are linked because they share the same reference world, the actual world of the possible-worlds theory. We may also recall that the atmospheric scenery of Mailer’s hometown fills the pages of his subsequent novel *Tough Guys Don’t Dance*, which, however, creates its own fictional world with only indirect “accessible relations” to the actual world and the reality of *Fire* and *Prisoner*.

the course of the narrative, and this is “the result of his concern with form: the form of the moon trip which is ultimately, of course, his concern with *literary form*” (Bailey 1979: 117; my emphasis). In Mailer’s nonfiction a structural division and reflection between separate parts happens inside a work which contains two or three “books”; *The Armies of the Night*, as suggested before, serves as an example of a “schizophrenic” text which “would actually show its building blocks” (Hutcheon 1984: 28). Mailer’s moon book is constructed like a triptych, a three-part painting: the middle part, the largest, is accompanied and supported by two other parts, one on each side. Even though those two parts seem to be separate “stories,” they have their integral role in the narrative, so that a temporal and thematic continuum is maintained (as is the case in many triptychs on religious subjects). The first part of *Fire*, “Aquarius,” defines Aquarius’s position as a journalistic observer and the would-be writer of the book; the third part, “The Age of Aquarius,” will place Aquarius back into that position, now somewhat closer to the actual writing. The long middle part, “Apollo,” tells the main story, that of the Apollo 11 mission to the moon, which the two smaller sections are concerned with the writing about.⁸

When critically juxtaposing *Of a Fire on the Moon* with *The Armies of the Night*, Robert Merrill sees certain “superficial” self-reflexivity in “this [three-part] structure [which] seems to resemble that of Mailer’s better essays, in which he begins and ends with his own relation to an event described in the middle” (1992: 137-138). Anderson, on the other hand, argues that the narrative of *Fire* is constructed *progressively*, which means that the work as a whole provides three “growing” viewpoints on and versions of the subject matter:

Each of the three parts is a different approach to the same material, as if Mailer starts over three times and offers us three different versions of the same book – the first, “Aquarius,” an account of his writing of the piece; the second, “Apollo,” a more conventional, journalistic account of the mission itself; the third, “The Age of Aquarius,” a poetic meditation on what the mission in the end might mean. [...] each section is progressively tighter and more synthetic, an increasingly more satisfying mastering of the material. (1987: 90)

In my own reading I see some obvious differences between the sections, and they may “grow” progressively, each being a “paradigm” in the “syntagmatic” line of narrative. Still, at the same time, we may note the narra-

⁸ Originally Mailer’s representation of the moon flight appeared as three separate articles in *Life* magazine (see, e.g., Hellmann [1981: 145n]). *Of a Fire on the Moon*, in its book form, provides a literal example of Mailer’s transforming journalistic material into novelistic form.

tive dimensions of the work as a whole, and see how it also functions on metonymic/syntagmatic levels in addition to its metaphoric/paradigmatic levels. As Sam Girgus argues, the self-conscious novel/history dichotomy of *The Armies of the Night* is constructed upon imagination and documentation, or upon metaphorical poetry and metonymical narrativity. Thus *Armies* “proceeds on at least two planes – a vertical one of ascendance toward moral truth and a horizontal one of story toward emotional and aesthetic truth” (Girgus 1984: 145). We may recall Mailer’s reflection cited above, according to which “a political reporter has a fixed view of the world; you may plot it on axes that run right to left on the horizontal and down from honesty to corruption on the vertical” (SHM xi). In *Fire* we may construe a horizontal narrative line which includes Mailer-Aquarius’s attempt to write the story at the same time as the Apollo project proceeds. But if this is the horizontal, or metonymic, level of the narrative, we have another level, increasingly more difficult to interpret, which is connected with the *meaning* of all this, and we may call it a vertical, or metaphorical, level. This is, of course, the thematic “deep” structure of the narrative, calling for symbolic interpretation and mythological explanation of the moon flight.

What is a sign of typical Mailerian self-consciousness, however, is that the “progressive” structure of *Fire* not only presents “a more satisfying mastering of the material,” as Anderson has it, but also defers the resolution of the problem of writing. Even on the last page of the book Mailer-Aquarius is seeking some starting point, some coherence, and a clarifying metaphor which would work as a “key” to the whole. Instead of only “covering” the moon flight for *Life* magazine, he finds himself at the threshold of *discovering* the biggest possible questions. As the narrative of *Fire* proceeds, Mailer-Aquarius rejects his role as a “flawed” reporter and resumes his “real” position as a novelist. The reader is given an impression that the book is not a completed object but something in the process of becoming; in this way the second “plot” of the narrative – in addition to the moon flight – concerns the process of production of this text. Mailer argues that much like the study of history, the study of science “begins with legends and oversimplifications,” but then “the same ground is revisited, details are added, complexities are engaged, unanswerable questions begin to be posed” (FM 155). At this point of the narrative, the Apollo moon shot has already been presented in the first section of the book, but mainly through journalistic methods and as it has been covered on TV. Now, when Aquarius’s own writing is about to begin, he reflects that “we embark once again on the trip of Apollo 11” and “we will launch [the astronauts] again and yet still again,” and this is because the event must be represented again, “the story steeped in further

detail has become something like another account" (FM 155). Mailer thus "goes through the most crucial events of the moon voyage and landing twice, first imaginatively outside and then inside the events" (Landow 1986: 147). What Mailer is suggesting here is that a nonfictional story may be told again and again, because it can never be completed; there are always deeper explanations and further details to be added to the story. This means, in a self-reflexive way, that even this narrative is incomplete, and thus it must be a failure; only fiction can succeed in creating the whole picture which cannot be challenged.⁹

In so far as *Of a Fire on the Moon* is an attempt at "novelistic" speculation about what the moon flight might signify, it relates to Mailer's notion in *The Armies of the Night* that "an explanation of the mystery of the events at the Pentagon cannot be developed by the methods of history – only by the instincts of the novelist" (AN 255). In *Fire* – especially in its long middle section "Apollo" – Mailer is "insisting that the strangeness and complexity of the world can never be adequately accounted for by a strictly rationalistic epistemology" (Wenke 1987: 178). If Aquarius first seems to be adopting his new name and role as "the Navigator" for the purpose of "navigating" through facts and documents, he concludes that to cope with the large variety of confusing daily experiences, "the services of a Novelist" must be added to the Navigator (FM 157). The role of the Navigator furthermore implies the method of making one's way through texts and documents, facts and fictions, and gives Mailer's book a sense of hypertext. (This idea of navigating is made explicit in *Oswald's Tale*, where it is suggested that the so-called facts may operate as "navigating instruments" in the composition of narrative [OT 353]) Mailer-Aquarius's discussion of the possibilities of "the novel" once again comments on this very book by placing it into an imaginary context of unwritten novels constantly shaped in individual minds:

It seemed to him that everybody, literate and illiterate alike, had in the privacy of their unconscious worked out a vast social novel by which they could make sense of the society. Obviously, each novel was different. Obviously, some were better than others. But whether each unwritten novel was a comprehensive work of art, or an unhappy one, the psychic fact was that as life presented new evidence, the book was altered in its details. (FM 157)

⁹ As stated earlier in this study, nonfictional narratives are verifiable and incomplete, whereas fictional narratives are unverifiable and complete, so that we can always check on the accuracy of a nonfictional text, point out factual errors, and write a new one based on newly discovered evidence. Here we have an example how nonfiction may "move" and "change," for in the second edition of *Fire* Mailer felt obliged to correct certain facts that were wrong in the first edition (cf. Hellmann 1981: 53).

Aquarius goes one to suggest that certain large events such as births and deaths, successes and failures may indicate that one's vision of society has been *faulty*, and because of that revelation "the outlines of the novel would be drastically revised" (FM 157). There is an ongoing implication in *Fire* that this book may succeed in being a kind of art work, but it may still – at the same time – be a failure.

Moby-Dick as a Subtext

Of a Fire on the Moon is on several levels a "postmodernist" rewriting of Melville's *Moby-Dick*, the great American novel which Mailer alludes to in his various texts but which here functions according to strong subtextual patterns. To begin with, we may note that the character of "Aquarius" (or, to be exact, "Norman, born sign of Aquarius" [FM 3]) in some ways resembles that of Melville's narrator-protagonist who adopts the name "Ishmael." In the beginning of *Moby-Dick* Ishmael finds himself "growing grim about the mouth," feeling "damp, drizzly November in [his] soul," wandering without clear aim and purpose (see Melville 1951 [1851]: 7). In a similar mood, Aquarius, at the beginning of the narrative, "feels in fact little more than a decent spirit, somewhat shunted to the side" (FM 4), feeling "mildly depressed, somewhat used up, wise, tolerant, sad, void of vanity," and with even "a hint of humility" (FM 5-6). Eventually, Aquarius's route ironically parts from that of Ishmael, for *he* is not allowed to step on the "ship" and take part in the actual adventure. The closing of the second section of *Of a Fire on the Moon* shifts the narrative focus back to Aquarius after the Apollo rocket's flight is successfully completed: "We are back to Aquarius moldering on flatlands not far from the sea" (FM 431). *Moby-Dick* famously ends with the narrator Ishmael's short epilogue after the destruction of Ahab's ship *Pequod*: "The drama's done. Why then here does anyone step forth? – Because one did survive the wreck" (Melville 1951 [1851]: 493). In this way, the actual adventure is in both cases framed by the narrator's somewhat grim and depressed personal reflection. Aquarius thus resembles Ishmael as a "skeptical humanist who reflects" and who "projects and posits, suggests and broods on the wedding of mind and matter, of meditation and water" (Coale 1985: 27). Ishmael's brooding on the ocean and the whales is now replaced by Aquarius's reflecting upon space and the rockets.

As *Pequod*, headed by Captain Ahab, sails to meet the fears, challenges, hopes and mysteries represented and symbolized by the White Whale, so does the Apollo rocket, commanded by Captain Armstrong, fly towards

the Silver Moon and its large mysteries.¹⁰ Stephen Rojack in *An American Dream* also sees the moon as “a silvery whale,” which slips up from the clouds, “coming to surface in a *midnight sea*” (AD 259; my emphases). In *Of a Fire on the Moon* Mailer even suggests that to remain an astronaut, “one might need some of the monomania of Captain Ahab” (FM 331). On the other hand, the “white” rocket itself can be connected to the “white” whale; as Aquarius ponders: “A Leviathan was most certainly ready to ascend the heavens” (FM 55); “sainted Leviathan, *ship of space*” (FM 84; my emphasis). We may note that in the American literary scholarship, “Leviathan,” a Biblical sea monster, is frequently associated with Moby-Dick. When discussing Mailer’s work in the context of the romantic and prophetic jeremiad, Landow suggests that Mailer makes “elaborate comparisons between the huge white rocket and Moby Dick, another American incarnation of awesome power pervaded by moral and spritual ambiguity” (1986: 147). Like Mailer’s moon book, *Moby-Dick* also includes the metonymic, or realistic “surface” narrative – the ship sailing to meet the whale – and the metaphorical, or poetic/allegorical deep structure in which the White Whale in the depths of the ocean symbolizes different aspects of the universe. In *Fire*, other poetic and mythical images are employed as well, albeit somewhat ironically. Mailer thus concludes his description of the moon flight as the astronauts are returning to earth: “They have been as far as Achilles and Odysseus, as far as Jason who sailed to meet the argonauts, far as Magellan and Columbus, they have been far” (FM 431).

Melville’s “great American novel” is, of course, one of the primary texts to which modernist and postmodernist American writing relates, often through parody. Linda Hutcheon maintains that in “*Of a Fire on the Moon* the moon/whale sought after by Aquarius/Ishmael comes alive in a familiar (but here, ironic) language that mixes technical concreteness with transcendent mystery” (1989: 14-15). Mailer’s moon book may exemplify Ross Chambers’s thesis about a text’s “situational self-reflexivity,” functioning through repetition, reflection, and mirroring, including intertextual reference, which *situates* one work of art (*Moby-Dick*) inside another (*Fire*), and thus directs reading and interpretation (see 1984: 31). Robert Kiely’s study

¹⁰ Mailer provides one possible key to this analogy when recalling President Kennedy’s visionary words at the beginning of the decade. Addressing America, Kennedy urged the nation to achieve the goal of landing a man on the moon before the decade is out: “‘This is a new *ocean*, and I believe the United States must *sail* upon it’” (FM 5; my emphases). However, this romantic vision is followed by a dark decade (including the assassination of Kennedy), and Mailer’s narrative is ironically obliged to close with the rhetoric of another President, Nixon: “‘But this is the greatest week in the history of the world since the Creation’” (FM 452).

The Reverse Tradition offers illuminating notions of how a more recent (postmodernist) text can be “seen” in an older (classical) text because of their similar and shared semantic features. The process of borrowing, reflection, and transformation is circular and continuous, so that “to reread Melville after reading Beckett is to find his prose ‘haunted’ by bleak humors and linguistic self-consciousness that appear contemporary” (Kiely 1993: 35). It might be argued that the reading of Mailer’s “postmodernist” *Of a Fire on the Moon* sheds some new light on Melville’s “classical” *Moby-Dick*. Intertextuality may be one sign of the ‘literariness’ of a certain kind of nonfiction, like the mode represented by Mailer’s work, while these features may be lacking in other modes of factual account. Typically, intertextuality has been understood as a property of texture, which means that it has been traced on a microstructural level. As Lubomír Doležel notes, however, “literary works are linked not only on the level of texture, but also, and no less importantly, on the level of fictional worlds” (1998a: 201-202). The connecting of different texts thematically through the interpretation of their similar or overlapping story-worlds is apparently a more common feature of reading than a more detailed analysis of the signs of their texture.

According to the poetics of intertextuality, literary works are “made” of other literary works (including generic conventions, motifs, plots, and archetypes) that they quote, repeat, or transform. As various theorists representing structuralist poetics suggest, the idea of intertextuality works concretely in “traceable” cases, and in my study, too, the main interest is in specific intertextual links, paratexts, allusions, and *subtexts*.¹¹ It seems that in his moon book Mailer seeks literary “validity,” richness, and complexity by consciously using *Moby-Dick* as his subtext and by transforming its fictional, metaphorical-mythological-scientific world into his own narrative, mythical, and speculative purposes. Doležel, referring to Hutcheon, argues that the semantic analysis of intertextuality has become a significant form in the context where postmodernist texts rewrite classic ones:

In rewriting a classic work the postmodernist writer not only rejuvenates the past [...] but also challenges it. Postmodernist critical theory questions and ‘corrects’ the established, inherited literary canon. Postmodernist rewrites of classic works

¹¹ The concept of the subtext refers here to “other” (literary) texts (e.g., Melville) that provide thematic motivation for the “primary” text (e.g., Mailer). This means that various themes and motifs in *Of a Fire on the Moon* are “activated” by the uncovering of intertextual links through the process of reading and interpretation. Thus the thematic function given to the primary text is possibly enriched by the discovery and the employment of hidden subtexts. As Pekka Tammi observes (on the basis of the methods of Kiril Taranovsky and his school), “an activated subtext is always used by the author for specific thematic ends, and this necessarily affects our interpretation of the primary text” (1999: 33).

pursue the same goal by literature's own means: they confront the canonical protoworld by constructing a new, alternative fictional world. [...] All postmodernist rewrites redesign, relocate, reevaluate the classic protoworld. Undoubtedly, this remaking is motivated by political factors, in the wide, postmodernistic sense of 'politics.' (1998a: 206)

It is a characteristic feature of contemporary American literature that it rewrites the texts of the past. In a sense, "all modern art shares this self-conscious attitude to the past, this anxiety deriving from its belatedness" (Onega & García Landa 1996: 31). As Mark Currie suggests, "novels which reflect upon themselves in the postmodern age act in a sense as commentaries on their antecedents"; consequently metafiction often depend upon intertextuality for their self-consciousness (see 1995: 1, 4). By connecting the concepts of self-reflexivity and intertextuality, we may note that a metatextual work critically reflects not only previous literary conventions but its own conventions as well. In Mailer's moon book, Melville's classic is obviously redesigned and re-evaluated in the new context and in the new (non)fictional world, and it seems to me that the very subject of Mailer's book, the first moon flight, belongs to the area of the poetics and politics of postmodernism. Yet, as I argue throughout my thesis, "postmodernist" nonfiction deals with and reevaluates the texts of the past, both fictions and histories, in a different way from postmodernist fiction, because of its "obligatory" referentiality to the actual world, its history and its texts.

In Aquarius's first vision and account of the launching of the rocket, one of the most poetic sections of *Of a Fire on the Moon*, the actual imagery and prose style of the final pages of *Moby-Dick* come to the surface, evoked by an explicit reference to the source text:

Two mighty torches of flame like the wings of a yellow bird of fire flew over a field, covered a field with brilliant yellow bloomings of flame, and in the midst of it, white as a ghost, white as the white of Melville's *Moby Dick*, white as the shrine of the Madonna in half the churches of the world, this slim angelic mysterious ship of stages rose without sound out of its incarnation of flame and began to ascend slowly into the sky, slow as Melville's Leviathan might swim, slowly as we might swim upward in a dream looking for the air. (FM 100)

The poetic imagery adopted by the author-narrator promotes his attempt to construct a mythological explanation of the moon flight. However, this really is an *attempt*, an *essay*.¹² It may succeed or fail, as in *The Armies of*

¹² An "attempt" obviously connotes the tradition of *essay* writing. Similarly, the very title of Mailer's moon book implies an attempt to write *of* something. As Carl Klaus argues, placing the essay form in the context of literary nonfiction, the essayist sets the essay off "against highly conventionalized and systematized forms of writing, such as

the Night, where Mailer gives his chapters titles like “Arbitrated Aesthetics” or “Aesthetics Forged” in order to emphasize the complexities of transforming a real event into narrative text (cf. Reed 1992: 112). As Tabbi suggests, “the powerfully significant failure to signify has always characterized the rhetoric of the sublime,” and the typical Mailerian attempt, “like all sublime attempts at literary transcendence, is doomed to failure” (1995: 13, 52).¹³ While Mailer-Aquarius’s poetic vision of the launching of the rocket alludes to the surfacing of the White Whale at the end of Melville’s novel, Mailer’s long, sprawling, “searching” sentences also recall Melville’s “long streaming clauses” which at the end of *Moby-Dick* “rise and fall with the swell of the ocean waves themselves” (Vincent 1980 [1949]: 389). The reader’s attention may not only be drawn to Mailer’s conscious composition, but even more directly to Aquarius’s experience and focalization at the actual moment as he is surrounded by flames and sounds, metaphorically those “ocean waves” of Melville.

In the paragraph above, the reader’s attention is drawn to Aquarius’s experimentation at the moment of writing, his active use of repetition – as if attempting to find the right words to express the right meanings – like in the use of “flame,” “yellow,” “white,” “slow,” and so on. Here the *style* of writing means “the expressive function of language” more than its “notional, cognitive, or semantic function” (Genette 1993 [1991]: 89). While there is an obvious *referential* function to Mailer-Aquarius’s rhetoric here, it also foregrounds the *poetic* function, apparently because he wishes to see the rocket through the poetic imagery of *Moby-Dick*. Aquarius’s vision and rhetoric strongly alludes to Ahab’s vision of “the white flame [that] lights the way to the White Whale!” and of the “clear spirit of clear fire” (Melville 1951 [1851]: 435). The very climax of Melville’s novel also works as a forceful subtext to Mailer’s “Gnostic” vision of the struggle between the forces of good and evil:

rhetorical, scholarly, or journalistic discourse,” emphasizing the essay’s “naturalness, openness, or looseness as opposed to the methodicality, regularity, and strictly ordered quality of conventional prose discourse.” Stressing the essay as “a very problematic form of writing,” Klaus sees that “the form of the essay will appear to reflect the process of a mind in action” (1989: 168, 173). By foregrounding his “style of thought,” Mailer-Aquarius reflects the process of his mind in action, seeing his subject matter as an open-ended field which requires an open-ended process of writing.

¹³ According to John Limon’s analysis, Mailer’s “generic flexibility” in his moon book, his blending of the realms of literary and factual, “is at least partly an attempt to live in a scientist’s historical moment” (1990: 188). Still, for Limon, this kind of self-conscious literary response to the powers of technology is doomed to fail because of the gap between literature and science.

A sky-hawk that tauntingly had followed the main-truck downwards from its natural home among the stars [...]; the bird of heaven, with unearthly shrieks, and his imperial beak thrust upwards, and his whole captive form folded in the flag of Ahab, went down with his ship, which, like Satan, would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her, and helmeted herself with it. (Ibid.: 493; my emphases)

Mailer's mythological interpretation of the moon flight suggests, at first, that Apollo might really be sailing in the wake of *Pequod's* quest: "For the notion that man voyaged out to fulfill the desire of God was either the heart of the vision, or anathema to that true angel in Heaven they would violate by the fires of their ascent. A ship of flames was on its way to the moon" (FM 103). As Harold Bloom believes, in Melville's Gnostic and Manichean vision there is a suggestion that "the hunt of Moby-Dick is against God's purpose" (2000: 237); this is clearly alluded to in Mailer's vision of the moon flight. *Moby-Dick* presents man living in an insolubly dualistic world, caught between "apparently eternal and autonomous opposites such as good and evil, heaven and hell, God and Satan, head and heart, spirit and matter" (Chase 1980 [1957]: 91). Of course, Mailer's thematization in *Of a Fire on the Moon* carries a close resemblance to both Melville and Manichean philosophy, and by imposing his own larger romantic plot upon the event Mailer transcends the earthly struggle between the artist and the scientist and addresses the heavenly battle between God and the Devil. It has even been suggested that Mailer's "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" (Whalen-Bridge 1998: 126; my emphasis). Samuel Coale thus considers Mailer a "romantic" anti-novelist similar to Melville, both of them being "tormented" by "cosmic urges" and "Manichean visions" and employing "allegory and rhetoric to polarize their vision of the world around them" (1985: 23-26).¹⁴

The reader of Melville's novel is confronted by a plurality of linguistic discourses, like those of the scientific essay, the Bible, philosophical speculation, historiography, poetry, and so on.¹⁵ The structure of Mailer's

¹⁴ In *The Naked and the Dead* Lieutenant Hearn has written a thesis with the title *A Study in Cosmic Urge in Herman Melville* (ND 295). *Moby-Dick* functions as an almost invisible subtext in the patternings of Mailer's first published novel, being a deep influence with its "cosmic" concerns behind the more naturalistic surface of the narrative. As Mailer has noted about *The Naked and the Dead*, "I had Ahab in it, and I suppose the mountain was Moby Dick" (Lennon [ed.] 1988: 15).

¹⁵ This is not to suggest, however, that the embedded texts in Melville are nonfictional parts in the work of fiction, no more than the embedded texts in Mailer are fictional parts in the work of nonfiction. The work's overall status as fiction or nonfiction is not altered because of these self-consciously constructed allusions. According to John Searle's speech-act theory, fictional narratives may contain nonfictional elements, but from Stein

book also contains different texts and discourses which ask for the reader's participation: "*Of a Fire on the Moon*, thus, could be described as a kind of modern palimpsest or mosaic of conflicting texts [which are] embedded within the larger text, permitting the reader to fill in the gaps, to formulate connections between texts and the frame, in short, to invest the text with meanings" (Schuchalter 1995: 135). In Chase's words, Melville's "great book" represents "extremely impure art," being "a hybrid"; in addition, the book has a "made-up quality," it is a good deal "put together" and is very much a piece of "literary fabrication" (1980 [1957]: 100). Again, here we have a primary example of a work of art which is not easily put together but rather resembles a "tortured" image, as suggested earlier in this chapter. As Howard Vincent notes in his classic study on *Moby-Dick*, Melville effectively blends "information with narrative, fact with suggestion and strange omen, to prepare us for the climactic battle between ship and whale" (1980 [1949]: 371). To some readers, there is a structural and artistic problem in Melville's "tedious" scientific descriptions (embedded "documentaries," as it were) of whales and whale-hunting in *Moby-Dick*. In any case, we may see here how Mailer alludes to Melville's novel through his own (arguably even more "tedious") descriptions of rocket technology and NASA engineering. According to one critic, the virtue of artistic unity escapes Melville, resulting in a structural "failure." For him, *Moby-Dick* seems to be a combination of separate books, so that "obviously Melville began to write one book and then changed his mind, never bothering to harmonize his two separate intentions" (Zweig 1974: 189). This comes close to Mailer's notion about the divided nature and structure of Picasso's *Demoiselles* painting.

The narrative text of *Moby-Dick* has a visibly "epic" character; its combination of several kinds of textual materials shapes it as "a work searching for an appropriate form" (Claridge 1998: 854). Through this textual and formal search the author's role as a self-conscious organizer is foregrounded, and Melville may use his narrator Ishmael as a medium in order to present his romantic theories of composition. As the narrative tells the story of Ahab's quest for the White Whale, on a higher level the novel itself is a complex and perhaps ultimately "failed" quest of its maker for the boundaries and possibilities of literary form as well as for eschatological certainties (including the existence of God and the being of the universe).¹⁶

Haugom Olsen's aesthetic-intentional viewpoint, this theoretical stance leads to a number of problems: "It involves seeing a literary work as made up of two types of discourse with different cognitive status which must be both understood and evaluated in different ways" (1987: 171; cf. Searle 1979 [1975]: 72).

¹⁶ Despite its later canonical status, *Moby-Dick* was at first considered "a failure, derided and misunderstood by those who read and reviewed it" (Claridge 1998: 853). In his essay on *Huckleberry Finn*, Mailer notes that some great American novels other than

This is not necessarily to say that Mailer's book works as a parodic rendering of Melville's classic, though this is suggested by Hutcheon, who further argues that "the canonical texts of the American tradition are both undermined and yet drawn upon, for parody is the paradoxical postmodern way of coming to terms with the past" (1989: 14). *Parody* may be understood as an intentional reproduction of an original work whose features are exaggerated, distorted, inverted, or recognizably changed for various purposes (critical, satirical, and so on). It is thus "a generic term for a range of related cultural practices, all of which are imitative of other cultural forms, with varying degrees of mockery or humour" (Dentith 2000: 192). A parodic text is "a work of literature or other art that imitates an existing piece which is well-known to its readers, viewers, or listeners with satirical, critical, or polemical intention" (Hoesterey 2001: 13-14). According to Jonathan Culler, in its serious form, "parody must capture something of the spirit of the original as well as imitate its formal devices and produce through slight variation [...] a distance between the *vraisemblance* of the original and its own" (1975: 152-153). Here verisimilitude, or *vraisemblance*, is connected with naturalization and interpretation, which also means that we can make sense of *Of a Fire on the Moon* by locating it in its intertextual relationship with *Moby-Dick*. It might be more precise to think of *Fire* as containing an element of *pastiche*: it alludes and refers to and quotes from the style, language, and form of *Moby-Dick* without clear ironic or parodic implications and intentions. According to Ingeborg Hoesterey's definition, while in parody "characteristic features of the work are retained but are imitated with contrastive intention, [...] in pastiche this relationship is one of similarity" (2001: 14). Rather than an overt parody of any specific work, Mailer's moon book may also be regarded as a (post)modernist pastiche of styles and forms, including its self-conscious "homage" to the styles and forms of Melville's classic. Instead of believing in the possibility of producing an "original" and totally unprecedented work of art, the contemporary author constructs his or her work through stylistic quotations from a wide variety of literary and other sources, thus reaffirming a literary tradition while subverting some of its aspects.

Mailer, indeed, seems to (post)modernize Melville's classic by approaching a new, complex event (the moon flight) through a new, complex literary form (a nonfiction "novel"), still employing many of the themes, styles, structures, and ideas of *Moby-Dick*. Therefore we may grasp the similari-

Twain's have been unfavorably received at the time of their publication: "*Moby-Dick* was incinerated: 'Graphic descriptions of a dreariness such as we do not remember to have met before in marine literature'... 'Sheer moonstruck lunacy'... 'Sad stuff'" (SA 253).

ties between these two works both on the microlevel and macrolevel, that is, on the level of images, metaphors, and style on the one hand, and on the level of larger structural and formal repetition, on the other. According to Shklovsky and other formalists, parody is a central mode for the novel, for parody is one way of laying bare the processes of textual construction and highlighting literary self-reflexivity. In this sense, one may grant a status of parody to *Of a Fire on the Moon* because it not only reflects on itself, but, through its use of Melville as a subtext, also mirrors a larger literary tradition and reinscribes itself within it.

Poetry and Metaphor versus Science and Technology

Of a Fire on the Moon is largely constructed upon the opposition between science and poetry, and Mailer's task is to pit his own romantic myth of the universe against the scientific view. In the course of the narrative, Mailer, as Aquarius, appears to abandon his original assignment to write a purely factual newspaper account of the moon shot; instead, he uses "the occasion to fight what he sees as the last battle between science and poetry, the Armageddon of art" (Kernan 1986 [1982]: 146). Because the work of art is a formal composition, a constructed artifact, it also announces its distinction from social reality, but simultaneously it may give form to reality or ideology. Art is not a form of scientific knowledge and explanation; in Louis Althusser's words, "the real difference between art and science lies in the *specific form* in which they give us the same object in quite different ways: art in the form of 'seeing' or 'perceiving' or 'feeling,' science in the form of *knowledge* (in the strict sense, by concepts)" (quoted in Widdowson 1999: 118). This notion comes close to Mailer's strong juxtaposition and conflict between poetry and technology, or metaphor and science in *Of a Fire on the Moon*. Mailer thus sees poetry and science as alternative world-views and myths shaping the world in opposing ways.

Mailer's Romantic Mythology

Of a Fire on the Moon brings together Mailer's long-held preoccupation with both magic and technology, which appear to stand in a "Nemesis" relationship to each other (see Hassan 1975: 145). Joyce Carol Oates speaks of *Fire* as Mailer's most poetic and prophetic work which makes clear "how

strongly Mailer is committed to the pastoral past, a magical realm in which one has not the need to learn, to study, to train oneself in the complexities of his civilization" (1976: 191). Mailer's long-held and obsessive themes, including mysticism, romanticism, art and individuality, are written in the poetic language of *Fire*, emerging through specific figures, metaphors, and allusions. As Brian Wicker argues, "Mailer's plea for a return to an older poetic and metaphorical way of looking and describing the world is incarnated in the very style of the plea itself" (1975: 2). Obviously, Mailer's use of *Moby-Dick* and its imagery as a subtext adds to the poetic dimensions of his book.

The large mythological framework of *Fire* has been criticized even by some leading Mailer scholars, who argue that the moon shot was a more complex event than Mailer's characteristic good/evil antinomies would suggest (e.g., Poirier 1972: 160-161; Rollyson 1991: 234). As John Hollowell puts it, "Mailer must wrench the scenario of the Apollo flight to fit the metaphorical and philosophical schemes of his other books" (1977: 117). Still, we ought to see how Mailer-Aquarius "forces" and "pushes" his subject, self-consciously drawing the reader's attention to the artificial construction of his narrative and its mythical frames.¹⁷ It is apparent that in the case of the moon flight Mailer is not willing to allow a system of technological forces to take shape in his mind without first imposing his own imaginative structures on them (see Tabbi 1995: 47). In *St. George and the Godfather* Mailer, adopting again the role of Aquarius, speaks of "a cosmic whale of a thought for a man like Mailer [who] was nowhere near so good at answers as he was at posing questions" (SGG 4; my emphasis). In *Fire*, Aquarius has to ask whether the launching of the rocket is a human experiment which does not belong to God's plans; perhaps the mission of Apollo 11 "was disrupting God knows what Valhalla of angels and demons, what eminences of benignity and eyries of the most refined spook essence" (FM 245). In the "Apollo" section Aquarius describes the launching of the rocket again and from a new point of view: Melville's *Moby-Dick* and its romantic-transcendentalist imagery is replaced by the "Apocalypse," the *Revelation*. Here we see how Mailer-Aquarius's narrativization proceeds at the expense of 'facts,' for "Apollyon was not Apollo": "Apollo was in fact the god of light and Artemis, his twin sister, was goddess of the moon. But Aquarius ignored the fact that Apollyon was not Apollo and took it as a sign" (FM 209; my emphases). In a positive light, the "real" Apollo can be seen as a lightning rocket which travels to meet his twin sister the moon – and this kind of optimistic narrative might please the American audience. But Aquarius is pessimistic, and makes his negative interpretation, as the

text of the Revelation proceeds: “They have as king over them / the angel of the bottomless pit; his / name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he / is called Apollyon” (FM 209).

The moon shot is a large reflection of the nation’s spiritual state; therefore it “was a *mirror* to our condition – most terrifying mirror; one looked into it and saw intimations of a final disease” (FM 386; my emphasis). Mailer-Aquarius’s pessimistic vision is also constructed upon his notion that the moon shot, if it succeeds, “will seize the traditional symbol of the poetic imagination, the moon, transforming it into a dead object, another scientific fact” (Kernan 1986 [1982]: 146). It is as if Aquarius wants to see the moon flight as an apocalyptic venture whose route is dangerous and whose end is mysterious. The narrative of *Fire* begins with Mailer’s depressed memories of the suicide of America’s “greatest living romantic” (FM 4), Hemingway, at the beginning of the decade that would eventually produce, toward its end, the triumph of technology in the form of the flight of Apollo 11. As Oates sees it, Mailer’s stance in *Fire* is highly polemical and consciously oppositional, because the modern age of technology seeks to destroy “Manichean gods” or “Hemingway’s romanticism” (1976: 192). In one of the most inherently romantic and poetic sections of *Fire* Mailer-Aquarius imagines that “in that long-ago of prairie spaces when the wind was the message of America, Indians had lived beneath the moon, stared at the moon, lived in greater intimacy with the moon than any European” (FM 82). Then “the country had been virgin once, an all but empty continent with lavender and orange in the rocks, pink in the sky, an aura of blue in the deep green of the forest,” but “now, not four centuries even spent, the buffalo were gone, and the Indians; the swamps were filled; the air stank with every exhaust from man and machine” (FM 82). In Mailer’s emotional discussion of the “ghosts of the Indians,” in his romanticized nature metaphors and nostalgic longings for the idealized past, there is still sharp criticism of the modern age which attempts to destroy the past.¹⁷ In *The Armies of the Night* Mailer asks: “Was the past being consumed by the present?” (AN 123). Hutcheon regards Mailer’s nonfiction, such as *Fire*, as illustrating her concept of historiographic metafiction: it is not only a question of idealizing or imitating the nostalgic past, it is also the question of producing critical

¹⁷ In his postscript to “Superman Comes to the Supermarket” Mailer makes the following self-reflexive admission: “I was forcing a reality, I was bending reality like a field of space to curve the time I wished to create” (PP 74).

¹⁸ Harry Hubbard’s narrative in *Harlot’s Ghost* opens with a similar kind of imagery: “The ghosts of these Indians may no longer pass through our woods, but something of their old sorrows and pleasures joins the air. Mount Desert is more luminous than the rest of Maine” (HG 3).

views on what the “past” is and what the “present” (1989: 14-15). Mailer’s vision can be compared to the idea presented by Leo Marx in his *Machine in the Garden*, according to which “the pastoral would soon be displaced by ‘the technological sublime’” (Blom 1999: 213; see Marx 1964: 3, 15).¹⁹

The coldness of the atmosphere and the detachment from the senses as felt by Aquarius can also be seen in the use of language, especially in the “technological” and “computerized” language of the astronauts and NASA. This discourse is represented by such monstrous jargon as “the cathexis-loaded dynamic shift vector areas of changed field domestic situations” (FM 28), a phrase somehow referring to an astronaut’s family life, or “a high quotient of availability-for-miscellaneous-unprogrammed-situations (known in the old days as charity, spontaneity, or generosity of spirit)” (FM 40). The language of the astronauts and the NASA administrators is checked to eliminate or at least conceal emotion: “The use of ‘we’ was discouraged. ‘A joint exercise has demonstrated’ became the substitution” (FM 39). As Mailer-Aquarius ponders, “the heart of astronaut talk, like the heart of all bureaucratic talk, was a jargon which could be easily converted to computer programming, a language like Fortran or Cobol or Algol” (FM 25). This is “a style of language” in which “phrases were impersonal, interlocking,” and “one man could have finished a sentence for another” (FM 32). This “computerese” seems to be close to Marshall McLuhan’s well-known notion of the medium as the message, because the idea is that “the message had to be locked into a form which could be transmitted by pulse or by lack of pulse, one binary digit at a time, one bit, one bug to be installed in each box” (FM 39).²⁰ When facing the technological world of NASA early in the narrative, Aquarius is “obliged to recognize that if the machine seemed a functional

¹⁹ Another important work of literary nonfiction focusing on the space program, Tom Wolfe’s *The Right Stuff* (1979), resembles Mailer’s *Fire* in its theme of the conflict between heroic mythology and the technological age. In his essay “The New Journalism” Wolfe criticizes Mailer’s “failed” narrative technique in *Of a Fire on the Moon*: “Mailer’s autobiographical technique never succeeds in taking the reader inside the capsule, much less inside the points of view of central nervous systems of the astronauts themselves” (1973: 188). However, Wolfe represents here his characteristic stance that it is appropriate to employ ‘fictional’ techniques of novelistic realism in journalism as well. To be more “successful” in his technique (according to Wolfe), Mailer should obviously have taken part in the moon flight as the invisible fourth person in the Apollo Lunar Module.

²⁰ Interestingly, the dialogue between Mailer and McLuhan in a television program in October 1968 reflects some of the crucial themes of *Of a Fire on the Moon*. Both express their typical and very different sentiments about man and the world: “*McLuhan*: I’m amazed. I think, Norman, you assume that man is the content of the universe. *Mailer*: I think he was the noblest invention of God. *McLuhan*: But that the universe was in a profound sense an extension of man. *Mailer*: No, I think the universe at one time was an extension of the Lord” (Lennon [ed.] 1988: 134-35). Mailer’s novel *Why Are We in Vietnam?* parodies McLuhan’s positive notions about “the extensions of man” in his *Un-*

object to the artist, an instrument whose significance was that it was there to be used – as a typewriter was used for typing a manuscript – so to the engineer it was the communication itself which was functional” (FM 13). Thus, “*the machine was the art*” (FM 13; my emphasis). This is a source of depression for an artist, since the machine itself has been redefined as a work of art.

Even one of the most famous and often-quoted phrases of modern history – Neil Armstrong’s ““That’s one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind”” (FM 124, 399) – sounds scripted, manufactured, and so flatly delivered that it does not express “even the slightest heartfelt spontaneous delight of a man doing something truly extraordinary” (Kernan 1986 [1982]: 149).²¹ When watching the landing on the moon through the television image on the movie screen with other reporters, Aquarius feels that the quality of the image is no better than “a print of the earliest silent movies,” and on this basis he sees that “there were moments when Armstrong and Aldrin might just as well have been Laurel and Hardy in space suits” (FM 127). Ironically, the event on television feels more real than the actual event itself; thus the astronaut Michael Collins (the one who will not step on the moon, since he is taking care of the Command Module) is told that he is “about the only person around that doesn’t have TV coverage of the scene,” to which Collins’s response is, “how is the quality of the TV?” (FM 127). Even more ironically, the first men about to step on the moon (Armstrong and Aldrin) are told by Capcom in Houston that “you guys are getting prime time TV there” (FM 393). It is as if the extraordinary event of the first moon shot is already, from the very beginning, staged as a safe and clear media event, directed to “the millions that are seeing us on television now,” as Nixon himself puts it (see FM 453). Aquarius, having watched the event on television, notes that “it was the event of his lifetime, and yet it had been

derstanding Media (1964); as Jennifer Bailey also suggests, “Mailer is parodying the extreme optimism and determinism of McLuhan” (1979: 76). In Mailer’s novel, the narrator who identifies himself as a boy named D.J., finally seems to lose his physical identity and is transformed into an electronic medium: “[A]nd these messages zoom across the lands, M.E.F. on call, at night – check on this, idiot expert technologue! – the ionization layer rises, the interference is less, the radio messages go further, zoom, zoom, zoom” (WAWV 206). Almost at the very beginning of the narrative there is a reference to McLuhan (WAWV 8), and the narrator appears to have adapted McLuhan’s media discourse, popular at the time: “[T]he air is the medium and *the medium is the message*, that Alaska air is real message – it says don’t bullshit, buster” (WAWV 54; my emphasis).

²¹ Ironically, after the successful return to the earth, the astronauts are given orders how to use language directly from the highest level: “NIXON: And incidentally, the speeches that you have to make at this dinner can be very short. And if you want to say fantastic or beautiful, that’s all right with us. *Don’t try to think of any new adjectives; they’ve all been said*” (FM 453; my emphasis).

a dull event” (FM 130), also because NASA “had succeeded in making the moon dull, the moon, that planet of lunacy and harvest lovers, satellite unlike any other moon in the solar system” (FM 410). According to Jerry Schuchalter, “how historic events can be drained of their significance is the actual theme of Aquarius’s meditations in *Of a Fire on the Moon*,” so that “Aquarius – the Romantic artist – attempting to fathom the mystery of the dream, the taboo, the magic and myth, wrestling with the constraints of language, is the perfect foil for Nixon’s staged media event” (1995: 140). The complex dimensions of the event are ultimately flattened into banal commercial advertising: “AMERICA’S SPACE PROGRAM BENEFITS ALL MANKIND – *Your Souvenir of Apollo 11 Lunar Landing*. Better Color Television. Water Purification at Less Cost. New Paints and Plastics. Lunar Walker for the Handicapped. Laser Surgery. Solar Power” (FM 81-82). This ideological rhetoric is ironically employed by Mailer who faces his main “enemies” here, television and plastic; he also cites a poem written by a computer: “Perfect plastic poem, for it left the same aesthetic satisfaction in the heart as the smell of vinyl” (FM 354).

Challenged by the language of technology and the communication as a mechanical function, Mailer’s aim in *Of a Fire on the Moon* is to “recapture” language and create an adequate form of representation that could make sense of the complexities of the moon flight. In front of the massive Vehicle Assembly Building, or simply “VAB,” feeling frustrated that something so big and complex can be signified by such a simple acronym, Aquarius muses:

All the signs leading to the Vehicle Assembly Building said VAB. VAB – it could be the name of a drink or a deodorant, or it could be suds for the washer. But it was not a name for this warehouse of the Gods. The great churches of a religious age had names. The Alhambra, Santa Sophia, Mont-Saint-Michel, Chartres, Westminster Abbey, Notre Dame. Now: VAB. Nothing fit anything any longer. The art of communication had become the mechanical function, and the machine was the work of art. What a fall for the ego of the artist. What a climb to capture the language again! (FM 55-56; my emphases)

After this troubled response to the space program, Mailer’s narrative becomes a story of “capturing language again” and reconstructing some position for “the ego of the artist.” The language of technology and NASA is primarily based on “computerese,” that is, on the binary system of ones and zeros. The entire attempt at “taking the moon” proceeds through the simple alternatives of yes/no and go/no go, whereas Aquarius’s position is closer to old romantic dualisms and Manichean principles of the simultaneous existence of good and evil, presence and absence, and true and false

(he also calls himself “a Manichean” [FM 91]). In *The Armies of the Night* Mailer satirizes “liberal academics” or “liberal technologists” who “*had built their hope of heaven on the binary system of the computer, 1 and 0, Yes and No*” (AN 17; my emphasis). Apparently, this “binary system” goes back to Leibniz who “attempted – in his lust to create a symbolic logic – to show that God was 1 and had created the world out of 0” (FM 356). As the original theorist of possible worlds, Leibniz believed that God had created the best possible world which is surrounded by other, alternative world-models. In *Fire*, Mailer contemplates whether “the digital computer was a diabolical machine, or the greatest instrument ever handed to man, but it could hardly be both for it was constructed on the implicit premise that all phenomena might yet be capable of capture by statistics” (FM 352). While ambivalence remains – “was the voyage of Apollo 11 the noblest expression of a technological age, or the best evidence of its utter insanity?” (FM 382) – Mailer still implies that “the binary system” of the computer cannot solve all the problems of the world and the universe, such as questions of God’s existence or human suffering. In fact, the descent of the lunar module to the moon’s surface highlights the potential dangers of the mission – there is *a fire on the moon*, a dreadful possibility that the astronauts cannot return to earth. This exemplifies the limited capacities of the computer: how could the computer understand human fear or find the solution to human pain? As Aquarius reflects, “anti-dread formulations were the center of it [the language of the computer], as if words like pills were there to suppress emotional symptoms” (FM 25). This is a topic that Mailer returns to in his next book, *The Prisoner of Sex*, when in his highly romantic-conservative style he strongly opposes mechanical birth-control and a technical discourse about sex and love.

In *The Armies of the Night* Mailer suggests that America has lost its soul to “a worship of technology,” for Vietnam is a technological war which aims paradoxically to destroy the mystery that is at the core of America itself as a Christian nation – America is burning “the bleeding heart of Christ” in Vietnam (AN 188). As Aquarius contemplates before the launching of the rocket: “Man was voyaging to the planets in order to look for God. Or was it to destroy Him?” (FM 79). If the moon shot is in some sense “an artwork,” then it may be “*a work of art designed by the Devil*” (FM 395; my emphasis). In *Of a Fire on the Moon* technology and its language aim at eliminating all poetic mystery, highlighted in the astronauts’ and the NASA people’s confrontation with the moon: “CAPCOM: ‘We’ve got some *beautiful data* here, Eagle. All those guys are looking at it – *system guys*.’ Beautiful data was *clear and thorough data*. An engineer’s idea of beauty

was *system perfection*. Beauty was obviously *the absence of magic*" (FM 311; my emphases). In the course of his writing, Mailer-Aquarius has deliberately rejected NASA discourse, whose "technologization" of language has eliminated those very words that might reach the mysterious levels of the event:

[O]ne was obliged to make a first reconnaissance into the possibility of restoring magic, psyche, and the spirits of the underworld to the spookiest venture in history, a landing on the moon, an event whose technologese had been so complete that the word 'spook' probably did not appear in twenty million words of NASA prose. (FM 106)

In this way there is an embedded plot in Mailer's moon book concerning the struggle between poetry and science, or between Aquarius and the technological world as represented by NASA. When pursuing his difficult writing objective, Mailer-Aquarius "tries to transform scientific fact into literature by imposing upon it the romantic myth, using the rhetorical strategies which instrument and embody the values of the myth" (Kernan 1986 [1982]: 155).²² In an essay entitled "Metaphor versus Science," Mailer speaks of "the unendurable demand of the middle of this century, to restore metaphor, and thereby displace the scientist from his center" (CC 310). We may recall that Mailer had been trained as an aeronautical engineer before becoming a writer (like Pynchon), and this makes his approach to space technology a solid and carefully argued one. Thus his "superb technical writing" "obviously demonstrates the often astonishing complexities of the technology involved in the moon program" (Landow 1986: 149; see also Dearborn 1999: 24). Mailer-Aquarius even admits, however sadly, that "there might not be time to develop men to speak like Shakespeare as they departed on heavenly ships" (FM 150), but still, as he later concludes, "certainly, the hour of happiness would be here when men who spoke like Shakespeare rode the ships: how many eons was that away!" (FM 471). In *Of a Fire on the Moon*, when facing the most spectacular technological achievement of the century, Mailer (or Aquarius) must constantly reflect upon the fact that his romantic and poetic vision is already circumscribed by the overwhelming power of science and technology.

²² *Myth* is not to be identified with *fiction* any more than it should be identified with *science*. Rather, myth concerns "the most real of all worlds, the very center of the believer's ontological system," and "as a representation of the real, then, myth targets the same reference world as scientific discourse" (Ryan 1998: 826). Myths are "imaginative patterns, networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world," so that "they shape its meaning" (Midgely 2004: 1). However, "whereas science tries to detach the object of study from the observer in order to reach objectivity, myth integrates

In his self-conscious adaptation of the name Aquarius (with connotations of astrology, magic, and water as a life-giving element) Mailer takes his position as the last high romantic in the tradition of Shelley and Blake, expressing his belief in the ultimate uncertainty behind the surface of the scientific world. It is no coincidence that in *Fire* the difficulty of reading technical manuals is compared to the deep knowledge of “the Descriptive Bibliographies of Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, Milton, and Donne” (FM 253). Early in the narrative he states that “Aquarius had long built his philosophical world on the firm conviction that nothing was finally knowable” (FM 7). As Alvin Kernan suggests, “Aquarius ultimately locates a mystery concealed behind all the confidently reductive terms of science: what is electricity finally? or magnetism? or gravity?” (1986 [1982]: 159). Aquarius contemplates that “technology is founded on the confidence that magic does not exist” (FM 161), and “still the enormous anxiety of technology remains” (FM 163); especially science needs to face the idea that “time remained as fundamentally mysterious as the notion that space was infinite” (FM 165). According to Mailer’s purely romantic vision – and in the tradition of Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry* – science and technology are deadening language, especially in its metaphoric, artistic, and creative dimensions and possibilities. Thus, it should be a task of the poets, novelists, and artists to maintain and support language in its richness.²³ As Mailer explicitly puts it, “it is one thing to murder the language of Shakespeare – another to be unaware how rich was the victim” (FM 386). In its profoundest sense, Romanticism (especially as represented by Blake, Byron, Shelley, and Keats) was “a spiritual revolt, a Promethean conspiracy to steal fire from the gods and to use it to drive them from their stronghold” (Falck 1989: 1). In *Fire*, Mailer as Aquarius takes his position as the last romantic poet revolting against the powers of technology.

As Mailer makes explicit, “metaphors then arise of a charged and libidinous universe with heavenly bodies which attract each other across the silences of space” (FM 224). Thus metaphor serves for Mailer as “the ultimate literary weapon against the depressing world of facts” (Tabbi 1995: 19). It is the inspiration of the artist, while metonymy is the tool of

the subject into a cosmic order” (Ryan 1998: 826). In Mailer’s vision, then, myth provides an alternative view of the same world that science tries to depict and explain.

²³ As one critic puts it, “the Romantic tradition supports the thesis of some contemporary writers (Mailer is the obvious example) that metaphor is necessary even for understanding, let alone describing, the findings of modern consciousness” (Wicker 1975: 12). Mailer, then, seems to take his position in a romantic-transcendentalist context which posits that metaphor can “reveal previously unnoticed aspects of the world” (Lamarque & Olsen 1994: 340).

the technocrat: "Metaphor invokes complexity, creativity, the discovery of new connections between familiar objects; metonymy is the product of reduction, of the technocrat's attempt to circumscribe and control reality" (Schuchalter 1995: 132). Mailer seems to be defending the centrality of metaphor in poetry as the core of imagination. In Culler's words, "[the writer's] metaphors are read as artistic inventions grounded in perceptions of relations in the world" and "poetry presents human experience to us in a new way, giving us not scientific truth but a higher imaginative truth, the perception of fundamental connections and relationships" (1981: 191-92; cf. Cardinal 1981: 21). However, the large, metaphorically rendered romantic plot never actually succeeds in *Fire*; it remains instead an attempt to struggle with the factual and scientific "plot" of NASA and the space program. As Kernan puts it, "no such poetic triumph takes place, and instead we get a fragmented, disordered narrative of a poet lacking any firm *a priori* grasp of events," a narrative which reflects "the feelings of the inadequacy and failure of the poetic vision" (1986 [1982]: 162). On the other hand, *Of a Fire on the Moon*, representing the tradition of the romantic and prophetic jeremiad, "relies upon an episodic structure that incorporates segments that alternate between satirical attack and positive vision" (Landow 1986: 187). Like *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer's moon book searches for an appropriate form and vision in order to communicate its complex idea and message, though never achieving any final answer or closure.

A Dream of the Universe

In Aquarius's view, to speak of such things as mystery, dream, or the unconscious "is to call up the set designer of one's own imagination" (FM 156). Furthermore, "if the matter is novel enough or dangerous enough, or involves preparation for most *artful kind of work*, this instrument of the psyche may even send appeals for information to the mansions, theaters, and dungeons of the deepest unconscious where knowledge of a more *poetic* and dread-filled nature may reside" (FM 156; my emphases). In *Of a Fire on the Moon* the method of "dreaming" becomes a method of novelistic representation, for in adopting the role of "the Navigator" in the "Apollo" section Aquarius states that "the dream was like the third eye of the Navigator, it looked into many a situation *the eyes of reality could hardly assess*" (FM 130; my emphasis). Aquarius claims that there must be more in a dream than Freud suggested when "reducing" it to wish fulfillment fantasies, and it has been suggested that Mailer's conception of the unconscious is not the

unconscious of Freud but rather the romantic unconscious of “imaginative creation” as described by Lacan (see Tabbi 1995: 48; cf. Wenke 1987: 179). Early in the narrative, Mailer-Aquarius has already reflected on the possibility of constructing his theory of the moon flight imaginatively upon a dream about “hovering” that Neil Armstrong had years ago.

Mailer works with various metaphors in *Fire* – “the dream” is one of them – but searches for some “real metaphor,” which would function as a “key” to the “lock” of the universe. Mailer-Aquarius believes that objects are “shaped in a way which offers meaning, not only scientific meaning, but existential meaning” (FM 302), and indeed he sees some symbolic meaning in almost every object. The relatively early introduction of “the moon rock” in the narrative provides Aquarius with another tool in addition to “the dream.” The second “appearance” of the rock as a symbol and motif happens at the moment when the Apollo rocket has been launched and Aquarius is seeking for some form to his narrative:

There had been another such moment when he entered the house. In the foyer was a painting by Magritte, a startling image of a room with an immense rock situated in the center of the floor. The instant of time suggested by the canvas was comparable to the mood of a landscape in the instant just before something awful is about to happen, or just after, one could not tell. The silences of the canvas spoke of Apollo 11 still circling the moon: the painting could have been photographed for the front page – it hung from the wall like a severed head. [...] it was as if Magritte had listened to the ending of one world with its comfortable chairs in the parlor, and heard the intrusion of a new world, silent as the windowless stone which grew in the room, and knowing not quite what he had painted, had painted his warning nonetheless. Now the world of the future was a dead rock, and the rock was in the room. (FM 133-34)

We may note that this passage occurs in the chapter “A Dream of the Future’s Face,” so that the images of dream, future, and rock are mysteriously interconnected. Thus, as Magritte’s painting gives the sense of another time and place, the actual moon rock which Aquarius faces at the end of the narrative is from a different, dream-like world and perhaps tells something about our future, “a new world.” In addition to this, the paragraph above contains one of Mailer’s typical self-reflexive tricks in its idea that “the painting could have been photographed for the front page,” for it becomes the cover of the first edition of *Of a Fire on the Moon*.²⁴

²⁴ As Joe Moran notes: “The way Mailer’s books have been packaged and sold has always contributed significantly to his public persona: the dustjacket cover of the first edition of *An American Dream* shows Mailer shadow-boxing, for example, while the cover of [his next novel] *Why Are We in Vietnam?* carries a picture of its author sporting a black eye” (2000: 72).

René Magritte's painting is entitled *Le Monde Invisible*, and it is thus related to the theme of Mailer's book, dealing with the epistemological/ontological question of what (or where) our world is and how we can know (and depict) it. Magritte's painting is, furthermore, used as an "embedded" text and as a minor *mise en abyme* device that reflects and mirrors some parts and questions of Mailer's book, just like the paintings of whale hunts function as minor reflections of the text in *Moby-Dick* (cf. Dällenbach 1989 [1977]: 98-100; 206n).²⁵ As Marianna Torgovnick argues, "scenes based upon the visual arts [...] become miniatures of the novel, initiating a process of repetitions and mirrorings that both illuminate the meanings of the novel and render its structure simultaneously lucid and complex" (1985: 214). Mailer-Aquarius formulates his own ideas and theories upon his creative interpretation of one of the possible meanings (a "dream" of the "future") that Magritte's painting suggests, and this interpretation is also constructed for the larger thematic purposes of Mailer's narrative. In addition to this suggestive representationalism which always needs the receptor's interpretation, the central part of Magritte's work and its interpretation is connected with the "play" between the picture and the title (e.g., *Le Monde Invisible*) and with its visual fantasy: "A favourite theme in [Magritte's] work is the dislodgement of the familiar and its replacement by those mental associations the object evokes; [...] and such associations at times create new entities" (Roston 2000: 193). In this sense there is some solid basis for Mailer's interpretations; the painting indeed depicts a rock, and it is entitled "the invisible world." The book closes with Mailer-Aquarius contemplating what the moon rock may tell about the world out there.

The introduction of Magritte's painting and its interpretation deepens the metadiscourse which runs throughout Mailer's book. After his long technological introduction, where Aquarius reads technical and scientific manuals about rocket engineering and the facts concerning the moon flight, the space capsule approaches the moon. This seems to demand a

²⁵ Magritte's painting of "the rock" resembles in a sense another painting by him, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* ("This is not a pipe"), his famous self-reflection that an art work as representation is distinct from its referent. The question and problem of representation is thus written in Magritte's work, as it is in Mailer's. As Wendy Steiner puts it: "Insofar as art refers to a similar reality, one can easily confuse it with that reality. But as Magritte shows in his famous painting of a pipe with the words 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe,' there is always a difference between a painted pipe and a real one, between art and its extra-artistic meanings" (1995: 76). It has been suggested (by Foucault among others) that Magritte's painting of a pipe precedes (post)modern 'representationalism,' according to which "words and pictures are not equivalents of fixed substitutes for objects or ideas but merely signs suggestive of them, loosely connected and needing to be interpreted by the receptor" (Roston 2000: 193).

new point of view, even a new language: “Enough of technology! Enough of engineering! Enough of reading dials and setting knobs. Let us rather take a good fear-filled look at the moon” (FM 227). Through this audience-addressing rhetoric, Aquarius shifts gears from technical facts to a more poetic narrative, and, as if through contiguity, even the astronauts seem to reject their technological language for a little while, for now they see the moon at a close distance: “*It’s quite an eerie sight.* What an absence of technology in the remark! We need not even guess at what a panorama they had” (FM 228). Here is a sight which has not been described in language before, because this is the first time that human beings physically see and feel the moon. It also poses a problem to the author-narrator as to how the moon really can be represented. It becomes clear to him that verbal or written language is not enough, and perhaps even photographs of the moon do not tell everything.

Now, however, Aquarius starts to ponder whether *painting* is a form of language which can reach mysterious answers that go beyond linguistic representation. The breakthrough of modernist art appears in Cézanne’s attempt to “destroy the surface” of both representation and the canvas:

A table-cloth in any one of his still-lives, taken inch by square inch, resembled the snowfields of mountains; his apples could be the paint-stained walls of a barn, or the clay roundings of a rock; the trunks of his trees were stems, or pillars, or hairs beneath a microscope. His skies, patch by patch, could be taken for a sea as easily as a light-blue throw cloth; and the skin which ran from a man’s eye to the corner of his mouth was like the sun-beaten terrain of his hills. In one lifetime of work, Cézanne disqualified the virtuosity of the craft and brought painting away from the capture of the light on material. [...] As he succeeded, so the orders of magnitude vanished in his painting, and one could not know, looking at a detail, whether Cézanne was representing the inside of a flower or the inside of a tent. Something in that vision spoke like the voice of the century to come, something in his work turned other painters out of their own directions and into a search for the logic of the abstract. Art had embarked on an entrance into the long tunnel where aesthetics met technology. (FM 301)

Writing at his desk, staring at a photograph of the moon, and interpreting Cézanne’s representations, Aquarius ponders whether written language suffices in his search for “the mysteries of form,” and how “that moon whose origins remained a mystery” (FM 282) can be represented. In Cézanne’s painting, grapes appear to look not only like grapes but also like something else; accordingly, the moon can be painted as something other, perhaps as a “heavenly body” (FM 282), or as a big grape. As Mailer suggests in his *Picasso* book, Picasso’s art and especially his “Cubism,” which was derived from Cézanne’s innovations, was not only an artistic representation

of, say, landscape but “rebellion against conventional landscape” (PPYM 271).²⁶ For Picasso, “*form is also a language*, and so it is legitimate to cite visual puns – that is, visual equivalents, and visual exchanges” (PPYM 59; my emphasis). The interpretation, in its simple form, is that “artists, for centuries, have been painting specific objects, only to discover that they also look something else,” like “flower’s petals” in Picasso’s view “as a cluster of grasping hands” (PPYM 59). As has been argued in much Picasso criticism, Picasso was trying to search for a *language* appropriate to painting, seeing both lines, forms and colors as equivalent of language. Aquarius is, then, forming his theory, based upon art, poetry, and metaphor, according to which the moon may be something other than what it is perceived to be in scientific language, which tries to “measure” it, and in the photographs which only cover a part of its surface. Even the language of literature does not appear to suffice for Aquarius, as if there was no sign or metaphor adequate enough to represent the moon. Rather than written language, “[a]rt and theater were ready to view the dimensionless dimensions of the moon on its far side” (FM 301).

As John Hellmann puts it, Mailer constructs the third part of the book, “The Age of Aquarius,” as “the search of its author-protagonist for an ending, a final meaning, to the book and its subject” (1981: 55). The symbolic texture of the last part of the narrative suggests that this is an age of endings and new beginnings, and Mailer-Aquarius actually begins this last part by contemplating the melancholic sense of *fin de siècle* in the summer of 1969. As a symbolic gesture, Aquarius and his old friends gather for the burial of an old car, a representative of the technology of the past in this age of the space program, but the car is painted to be “an artifact” and is entitled “Metamorphosis” (FM 464), in this way still confirming some romantic hope for both the past and the future. In Robert Begiebing’s allegorical reading of this scene, “machine” is turned into “life and art” (1980: 176). In the last pages of *Fire* Aquarius experiences a kind of metamorphosis or transformation himself, finally turning technical and scientific explanations into poetic and metaphorical ones. He carries with him Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, finding “the magic of savage metaphor” (FM 469) in that book. At the end of the narrative Aquarius finally faces his “true object” (FM 470). It is in the form of a moon rock brought by the astronauts and made to function as an object of scientific study, and the rock “gave him certitude enough to know he would write his book” (FM 471). Instead

²⁶ Picasso developed the art of Cubism with his experimental landscape painting, especially with his pictures of Horta de Ebro in 1909 (see also the cover of this book).

of a dead rock (as in Magritte's painting), this one seems to be a magically living thing.

The moon rock gives Aquarius two starting points in his attempt to write *this* book. Firstly, the rock confirms his belief that "we might have to go out into space until the *mystery of new discovery* would force us to regard the world once again as *poets*, behold it as savages who knew that if the universe was a lock, its *key* was a *metaphor* rather than measure" (FM 471; my emphases). Secondly, it is a question of "good" and "evil" and their ambivalence, or of their Manichean dichotomy: was mankind good enough or was the moon flight an attack upon "God"? In its voice from outer space is the moon rock speaking for or against us: "Marvelous little moon rock. What *the Devil* did it say?" (FM 471; my emphasis). Perhaps the moon rock and Aquarius's sense of it liberates his writing on the final page of the book. As Aquarius now knows how to write this book with metaphor as his key and the battle of God and the Devil as his allegorical guide, his actual personification Mailer, constantly reflecting on his problems of composition, now pours his painful personal experience and his poetic vision into a typically Mailerian long sentence, in a touching love poem to the moon rock:

Yet she was young, she had just been transported here, and there was something young about her, tender as the smell of the cleanest hay, it was like the subtle lift of love which comes up from the cradle of the newborn, and he wondered if her craters were the scars of a war which had once allowed the earth to come together in the gathered shatterings of a mighty moon – there was something familiar as the ages of the bone in the sweet and modest presence of this moon rock, modest as a newborn calf, and so he had his sign, sentimental beyond measure, his poor dull senses had something they could trust, even if he and the moon were nothing but devils in new cahoots, and child of the new century, Nijinsky of ambivalence, hanging man Aquarius, four times married and lost, moved out of MSC with the memory of the moon, new mistress, two feet below his nose, and knew he would live with the thought of a visit. (FM 472)

As we recall from the beginning of this chapter, when faith in mimetic representation became problematized, "mankind started dreaming in a different key" – not only by (re)discovering "the medium as the message" but also (as in Mailer's meta-nonfiction) using the medium for "transmitting" a certain message.²⁷ In postmodernist art, the medium has in some ways become the message, so that the only "meaning" and "content" of the work

²⁷ As Dorrit Cohn suggests when reading Freud's case histories as factual narratives (as opposed to those readings that emphasize their fictionality), "Freud's medium is his message; and no matter what we may ultimately think of it, we misread his message when we mistake his medium" (1999: 57).

is to be found in its form. But it is Mailer's idea in his poetics of nonfiction that "the medium is not the message, but the form in which the message is given, and this is taken as a stylistic device by the artists who have become conscious of the structure of the media" (Danto 1981: 146). By turning towards its own composition and meaning-making, *Of a Fire on the Moon* tries to make sense of our "unreal" reality, foregrounding the problems of representing it and implying its own failure to succeed completely in this complex project. In his next main work of nonfiction, *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer goes even further in foregrounding the importance of language in our perception of the world.

Chapter V

The Whiteness of the World: Language and Meaning in The Executioner's Song

The most idiosyncratic and characteristic part of Norman Mailer's non-fictional poetics is centered on the author's rhetoric in his confrontation with complex contemporary events, and in this sense we may argue that *The Armies of the Night* and *Of a Fire on the Moon* represent the core of Mailerian nonfiction. *The Executioner's Song* (1979) is characterized by dialogism and polyphony that contrast with the authorial rhetoric and self-reflexivity of those two works – which is one way of saying that *Executioner* represents a rather exceptional and individual case in the author's *oeuvre*.

The narrative of *The Executioner's Song* as a whole gives the reader an almost frightening sense of emptiness, meaninglessness, and void, since it renders the world as a large white field. My reading of *Executioner* focuses on the experience of the “whiteness” of the world that the book conveys; this gives my reading a certain phenomenological character.¹ Phenomenology is concerned with the ways in which a human being experiences and interacts

¹ In a sense, the phenomenology of reading (developed by Roman Ingarden and Wolfgang Iser) reflects the phenomenological view of the world in general. On the one hand, there is the world (or the literary work) itself, and on the other hand, there is the intentional act of perceiving and interpreting that world (or work). According to Ingarden, one's consciousness of a work of art is a temporally constituted flow of intentional acts, each one of which is directed in some way toward the given literary work. As Ingarden argues, the work of art is a purely intentional object which does not have a full existence without the participation of consciousness, yet does not depend entirely on a subject for its existence (see Ingarden 1973; cf. Levin 1973: xxi; Iser 1978 [1976]: 171-72; Freund 1987: 139). For an example of a phenomenological analysis of literary texts, see Matti Savolainen's *The Element of Stasis in William Faulkner* (1987). See also Paul Brodtkorp's study *Ishmael's White World* (1965), which presents a phenomenological reading of Melville's *Moby-Dick*, a subtext of much of Mailer's work.

with the world, and the ways in which his or her consciousness is directed toward various phenomena in that world. According to phenomenological accounts, then, all consciousness is consciousness of something; to maintain that “the world is white” is a perceiving subject’s notion of the world, a conscious and intentional act and perspective on the world. People try to make the world meaningful to themselves through their language; the phenomenological point is that different languages are also different ways of “being-in-the-world,” carrying specific intentions as well. In *Executioner* there is a strong phenomenological-existential experience of the world as white, empty, and meaningless space; this is the way it is perceived by individual characters who cannot find any other existence than being inside that world. *Meaninglessness*, then, becomes one of the *meanings* of the story, but the strong feeling of absence and void is not necessarily the bottom line. Of course, *The Executioner’s Song*, a difficult book to be absorbed and responded to, should be linked to the author’s *oeuvre*, where it may, by critical consensus, stand as Mailer’s greatest achievement.

Languages of the West and the East

The Executioner’s Song is Mailer’s self-proclaimed “true-life novel” about the crime and punishment of a life-time convict, Gary Gilmore, who committed two random murders in Provo, Utah, in 1976. Gilmore was sentenced to death and became the first person to be executed in the United States in ten years; he was, largely by his own choice, shot by firing squad at Utah State prison in January 1977. Instead of being in any way a “direct” rendition of these events, *Executioner* is an extremely long, complex and fragmented narrative, involving different voices and conflicting viewpoints upon the subject matter, and, unusually for Mailer, consciously lacking any visible authorial stance. What gives *The Executioner’s Song* a special place in the Mailer canon is its complex textuality, its self-conscious linguistic construction, and the partial overlap of its concerns with those of postmodernism and deconstruction.

Characters and the World

The narrative structure of *The Executioner's Song* is characterized by the division into "Western Voices" and "Eastern Voices," which implies that the country is hopelessly split and that the separate voices do not hear each other. As Mailer had already suggested in *The Naked and the Dead*, the schizophrenic halves of America cannot easily come together, and, as he made it more explicit in *The Armies of the Night*, when discussing the American novelist's failure to find his audience, "the two halves of America were not coming together, and when they failed to touch, all of history might be lost in the divide" (AN 158). The first part of *Executioner*, "Western Voices," is a kind of mythical narrative of the romantic West as presented through effectively simplified figuration and rhetoric. As another nonfiction artist Joan Didion noted in her review of the book,

The Executioner's Song is structured in two long symphonic movements: "Western Voices," or Book One, voices which are most strongly voices of women, and "Eastern Voices," Book Two, voices which are not literally those of Easterners but are largely those of men – the voices of the lawyers, the prosecutors, the reporters, the people who move in the larger world and believe that they can influence events. (1998 [1979]: 336)

As Didion suggests, the "Western" voices of the first part of the book are natural, everyday, colloquial, and harsh, whereas the "Eastern" voices in the second part are, instead, artificially produced, literary, and "civilized." The long narrative begins with a childhood memory of Brenda Nicol, Gary Gilmore's cousin; the narrative ends with a scene showing Gary's mother Bessie Gilmore. The story is, then, framed by two female figures, while in the middle there emerges Gary's young girlfriend Nicole Baker, the most convincing character in Mailer's entire *oeuvre*. Even though there are typical signs of romanticism in Mailer's representation of female characters, *The Executioner's Song*, more than any other of his narratives, encourages an empathically feminist reading. This is especially the case with Nicole, a young woman treated harshly by men from her childhood and now experiencing a tragic love story with Gary. Nicole (like Gary) is first presented in the story through the viewpoints of other people, so that these subjective visions aim at creating her character: "Spencer saw a very good-looking girl, hell of a figure, not too tall, with a full mouth, a small nose and nice long brown hair" (ES 63); "Yeah, thought Brenda, another girl who pops a kid before she's 15 and lives on the government ever after.

One more poverty-stricken welfare witch” (ES 65). Still, put between these remarks is Nicole’s own characteristic voice and personality as she comments on Brenda’s questions when Gary introduces her as his new girlfriend: “Nicole gave an angelic smile. ‘Hey, Spanish Fork, she got it,’ she said to Gary as if *little wonders grew like flowers on the highway of life*” (ES 65; my emphasis). This last metaphorical notion, rendered here through free indirect discourse, reflects Nicole’s approach to life, and ultimately her character provides a thematic core for the narrative as a whole.

A crucial aspect is obviously how Gary Gilmore himself is perceived from the viewpoint of other people. As Mieke Bal defines it: “Focalization is the relationship between the ‘vision,’ the agent that sees, and that which is seen. This relationship is a component of the story part, of the content of the narrative text: A says that B sees what C is doing” (1997: 146). Throughout *The Executioner’s Song*, Gilmore is always seen through some subjective vision. His first entrance in the story-world is focalized through his cousin Brenda:

Now she noticed his clothes. He had a black trench coat slung on his arm and was wearing a maroon blazer over – could you believe it? – a yellow and green striped shirt. Then a pair of beige polyester trousers that were badly hemmed. Plus a pair of black plastic shoes.

No matter, she liked his looks. In the half-light that came into the car as they drove through Salt Lake on the Interstate, the city sleeping on both sides of them, she decided that Gary was everything she expected in that department. A long, fine nose, good chin, thin well-shaped lips. *He had character about his face.* (ES 12-13; my emphasis)²

This early, detailed description of Gary’s rugged but attractive looks (his face and chin) can be juxtaposed with the autopsy of his dead body one thousand pages later:

Now, the fellow who was at the head of Jerry’s table made an incision from behind Gary’s left ear all the way up across the top of his head and then down below to the other ear, after which he grabbed the scalp on both sides of the cut, and pulled it right open, just pulled the whole face down below his chin until it was inside out like the back of a rubber mask. Then he took a saw and cut around the skull. (ES 1011)

² There is a similar scene in *Oswald’s Tale* where Lee Harvey Oswald is presented in the story for the first time as seen from the viewpoint of an Intourist guide, Rimma Shirakova, in Moscow: “When she went [...] to the assigned section of the Berlin Hotel lobby to meet him, there was only a boy, slender, of medium height, wearing a dark blue three-quarter autumn overcoat of inexpensive material and military boots with thick soles. Ordinary boots. *From her point of view*, someone traveling Deluxe should not look like this, certainly not!” (OT 43; my emphasis).

The autopsy scene, with its almost gory description, ends with a cruel irony as the narrator concludes, “when they were all finished, it looked like Gary Gilmore again” (ES 1011). Still, after this intentionally cryptic remark, Gilmore’s personality (like his motives) remains an enigma, a gap which haunts the narrative text and mirrors the large “unknowable” in the world and the minds of people in that world. Gilmore’s endlessly multiple personalities (or artificial postures) are being collected, however desperately, by reporter Barry Farrell as he marks the transcripts of Gary’s letters and interviews “with different-colored inks to underline each separate motif in Gilmore’s replies, and before he [is] done, he [gets] twenty-seven poses” (ES 830). There are, among others, Country-and-Western Gary, poetic Gary, macho Gary, self-destructive Gary, Karma Country Gary, Gary the killer Irishman, and “awfully prevalent” lately, “Gilmore the movie star” (ES 830). Even Gilmore’s voices, as heard in different recordings, are not the same.

Mailer clearly juxtaposes the brutal, desperate, and self-destroying struggle between prison and the “civilized” world as waged within Gary with the heroic attempts of his ancestors, the Mormon pilgrims, in their hard path to the fulfilment of their dreams. Gary’s mother Bessie stands as the last representative of this romantic-heroic vision of the past – she was like “Bette Davis playing a pioneer woman” (ES 459) – but even she is doomed to live in a spiritless present, surrounded by the desert where “nothing could grow” (ES 495). According to Morris Dickstein, Mailer, in the style of the Depression writers, sees Gilmore as the product and victim of the forces that created him. This authorial vision produces “a brooding sense of how the unvaried landscape, Mormon culture, and dysfunctional families resonate in people’s lives without fully explaining their behavior” (Dickstein 2002: 161). Mailer’s romantic interpretation of the tragedy of Gilmore connects it with the loss of one’s roots in the world of modern technology and violence.³ One of the prevailing themes in Mailer’s work, at least since the early sixties, has been the “totalitarian” drive of modern American architecture which creates “housing projects which look like prisons and prisons which look like hospitals which in turn look like

³ This modern corruption is pervasively figured by Mailer through his most idiosyncratic metaphor for corruption, *plastic* (see various essays reprinted in *The Presidential Papers and Cannibals and Christians*). Thus, Bessie has “a picture of living in this plastic house [a trailer] with plastic knees” (ES 495); Gary, as noted above, enters the storyworld wearing “a pair of black plastic shoes” (ES 12), and after his death we are told that his ashes have been put into “a plastic bag” (ES 1022). While plastic serves as an emblem of artificiality, consumerism, and capitalism in many cultural texts (especially in the sixties), Mailer’s particular antagonism toward it can best be interpreted on the basis of his mysticism and Manicheanism (see Chapter II).

schools” (PP 179). According to Mailer’s scheme, such architecture helps to divorce people from their connection to the past, depriving human beings of their meaningful roots. Joseph Wenke notes this theme in Mailer’s writing: “[b]oth history and the myths that would express the culture’s origin, values, and purpose are denied, reduced to cliché, or turned into forms of nationalistic propaganda, leaving all of us rootless, our attention fixed only upon the ephemeral pleasures and pains of the present” (1987: 13). Almost every character in *The Executioner’s Song* feels an emptiness in his or her life; for most of them life seems to lead to nothing.

However, it is mythology of the American West and its modern popularization which largely shapes the lives of the characters. In Barbara Lounsberry’s words, “one of the largest metaphoric systems in *The Executioner’s Song* involves parallels to the great American myth, the ‘western,’” and “the popular myth of the West seems to be the subconscious model by which the majority of characters in the volume operate” (1990: 183). Through a certain pessimistic irony, the romantic possibility of the frontier is all but eliminated in *Executioner*; thus “the traditional symbolism of the West is inverted, suggesting not limitless and transcendental freedom of ‘the hero in *space*’ but the imaginative paralysis that comes when one feels like an outcast whose fate it is to live in the middle of nowhere” (Wenke 1987: 202). Whereas for the classic American Western hero, beginning with Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, “space” was full of possibilities, just like the frontier was open, a (post)modern figure of the Man of the West, living in an emptied space, can only be a construction of popular culture, movies, and TV.⁴ As has been suggested, “the imagined West is a repository of stock images and plots endlessly repeated, reproduced, and re-presented in media, advertising, and literature” (Blom 1999: 17). Moreover, what Mailer’s book strongly figures is the masculine mythology of the West, a surface structure beneath which there may be a deeper and stronger feminine experience of past and present. As previously mentioned, the only one with some “real” connection to the western past is Gary’s mother Bessie, who lives near the desert where the traces of the Mormon pioneers are still partly visible. Gary’s own imagination is mainly constructed by television

⁴ As Mailer suggests in his various writings, Hollywood is a symbol of the “closing of the frontier.” In addition to the fictional figuration of “Hollywood” in *The Deer Park*, Mailer writes in *The Presidential Papers* that “when the West was filled, the expansion turned inward, became part of an agitated, overexcited, superheated dream life” (PP 39). In *Oswald’s Tale* he reflects that “when the frontier was finally closed, imagination inevitably turned into paranoia (which can be described, after all, as the enforced enclosure of imagination – its artistic form is a scenario) and lo, there where the westward expansion stopped on the shores of the Pacific grew Hollywood” (OT 723).

shows and popular western mythology (he believes that he was named after Gary Cooper); still, being a mixed combination of intellectual and brute, he is also attracted to poetry and mysticism, believes in reincarnation, and feels the presence of witches and demons.

There is little conscious poetry in the characters' speech in *The Executioner's Song*. Instead, their speech consists of banal, everyday clichés which have lost their power of expression and imagination, figures such as “poor as a churchmouse”, “drunk as a skunk”, “stabbed in the back”, “off the wall”, “spinning his wheels”, and “ass is grass.” Apparently, the use of common, overused metaphors is closely linked to the way life is experienced by the people of Utah: “[T]he series of simple, homespun metaphors [...] further enhance the Western atmosphere of the Utah setting” and “[t]hrough the use of these tropes Mailer forces readers to perceive [Gilmore's] story through the consciousness of the Western inhabitants” (Lounsberry 1990: 182). This imprecise and flawed use of figural language is associated with people's inability to communicate with each other and interpret their world. In this narrative Mailer ostensibly rejects the resources of language and rhetoric typical of his earlier work, but a significant part of his achievement in *Executioner* is his ability to take the banal idiom of everyday language to a higher artistic level. Indeed, “Mailer develops virtually every ‘minor’ character and permits each to speak in something like his or her own voice, however much the several idioms blend in the flat, colloquial style for which the book is famous” (Merrill 1992: 164), and “with a colorless prose accented by an occasional touch of slang, Mailer looks for clues to how these people think, how they look at the world” (Dickstein 2002: 161). In a phenomenological sense, the world is always experienced by a participating perceiver.

The narrative language of *Executioner* is consciously simple yet powerful; it is characterized by ordinary lexis, nouns denoting physical objects, and colloquial expression. The very style of the book appears to grow out of the harsh soil of the Utah deserts where the tragedy of Gary Gilmore takes place. We grasp dozens of American people explaining their own lives and experiences and memoirs, which, like all lives, are full of stories, inventions, and ‘fictions.’ John Hellmann, analyzing Mailer's narrative, speaks about “the fables by which they [people] live,” about “the private myths by which its [America's] citizens make sense of their lives,” and about “their private myths, the stories by which they explain the facts of their experience” (1986: 56). The narrative is expanded to many areas, including fragmentary life-stories and anecdotes quite detached from Gilmore. According to one critic, the narrative fragments of the book “finally reflect the unreflec-

tive mindlessness of the main characters” (Coale 1985: 38), but this is an example of a rather non-reflexive reading. What matters is that we, as readers, are able to read these people as they “read” their own lives. In the course of the long narrative, we grasp “the whole of a character’s mind in action: the total perceptual and cognitive viewpoint, ideological worldview, memories of the past, and the set of beliefs, desires, intentions, motives, and plans for the future” (Palmer 2002: 40). These readings of life partially construct the reflexive role of the actual reader who participates in the production of interpretations, focusing on, but not restricted to, the Gilmore case.

In *The Executioner’s Song* people’s discourse is connected with their specific subject-positions. This discursivity provides the book with the basis and idea of its structural division between western and eastern voices and its concentration on the conflicting representations of Gilmore. Jean Radford even argues that *Executioner* is “about the state of the nation’s language,” and that through its structure it is able to “direct us toward this kind of reading” (1983: 234). The reader faces about one hundred centers of consciousness or reflectors, each providing personal and always restricted visions into a mystery which is not only Gary Gilmore but also something larger, issues of life and death. As the prosecutor Noal Wootton explains, as though reflecting the narrative text as a whole, “[e]ach one [...] will give you a small piece of the overall story” (ES 416). The reflexive form of Mailer’s book – its combination of bits and pieces of journalistic reportage, interviews, transcriptions from various documentary archives, letters, telegrams, poems and songs – has a motivated connection to the content of the story which mainly consists of other people’s attempts at “reading” Gilmore’s acts and personality. The narrative text of *Executioner* is “filled with people who cannot comprehend the world” (Lounsberry 1990: 187), as in Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.*, where, however, the author “forces the reader to achieve a vision larger than that of any character of the book” (Fishkin 1985: 202). As Whitman heard “America Singing” in his prophetic text, Mailer hears modern America singing the executioner’s song.

American Voices: Reading People through FID

As suggested in Chapter I, *free indirect discourse* (FID) is not exclusively a mode of representing consciousness but is also a technique for rendering characters’ speech acts. We may argue that even in real life we construct the minds of others from their behavior and speech, and while this kind of “behavioral” construction and speculation is obligatory in nonfiction, it was

famously put to the service of modernist fiction by Hemingway. Here I will show how *The Executioner's Song* self-consciously leans on both literary modernism and the constraints of journalism in its use of free indirect discourse and in what sense FID may bring together the formal and ideological concerns of the narrative. This amounts to saying that free indirect discourse in nonfictional narratives can be seen as a conscious artistic strategy which both filters and transforms real-world materials such as interviews, adapting them to the purposes and “ideology” of the narrative.

One of the schools of formalist poetics sees FID as an instance of *unnatural* language – “a language that creates the reality of unreal, imaginary beings” (Cohn 1999: 25) – and deliberately foregrounds its purely fictive uses in representing a character’s consciousness (focusing mainly on thought representation). While Phyllis Frus is one of the few critics to analyze the literary effects of FID in journalistic and other nonfictional narratives, she also, rather strikingly to my mind, contends that “free indirect speech is always imagined, whether by a fictional narrator or a historical one” (1994: 10). I cannot concur in this view because it not only merges fictional and historical narration (implying that they function in similar ways) but it also suggests the similarity between *speech and thought representation* in FID. Monika Fludernik, by contrast, emphasizes the use of FID as a mode of representation based on oral storytelling, or at least on an imitation of it, that is, cases when FID renders characters’ *speech acts* rather than consciousnesses (see 1993: 94). In this sense, FID could be divided into free indirect *thought* and free indirect *speech*, the latter being the “spoken” equivalent of the former. As Jacob Mey argues on the basis of Bakhtin’s theory, in a sense all speech is *reported* speech, “reported not only *by* some speaker, but even more importantly, reported *to* some hearer,” and “in that consists the essentially dialogic character of language” (2000: 158). Speech and thought should, however, be separated from each other, for they are ontologically and pragmatically distinct categories; thought, as opposed to speech, is non-discursive, private, non-communicative, non-pragmatic and semi-verbal (see Jahn 1992: 349). The implication is that while the representation of the characters’ minds remains a characteristically fictive mode, the rendering of people’s verbal utterances can also happen outside fictional realms.

Fludernik’s emphasis upon “natural” narrative, oral storytelling, and speech representation allows FID a more social field, enabling it to be heard potentially everywhere. From this perspective, it should not strike us as illegitimate if FID appears in journalistic and other nonfictional texts, since both language and our tendencies to represent the speech of others is

“contaminated” by other voices and other discourses.⁵ What I would argue at this point is that nonfictional narratives should make the reader critically reflect upon those “prior” materials that these narratives transform into an aesthetic and literary form.⁶ In *The Executioner’s Song* there are several instances where the narration not only “imitates” dialogic communication but is actually derived from a tape-recorded interview between the author and a real-life person:

Brenda knew her power in conversations like this. She might be that much nearer to thirty-five than thirty, but she hadn’t gone into marriage four times without knowing she was pretty attractive on the hoof, and the parole officer, Mont Court, was blond and tall with a husky build. Just an average good-looking American guy, very much on the Mr. Clean side, but all the same, Brenda thought, pretty likable. He was sympathetic to the idea of a second chance, and would flex you if there was a good reason. If not, he would come down pretty hard. *That was how she read him.* He seemed just the kind of man for Gary. (ES 9; my emphasis)

This type of conversational discourse both represents and foregrounds oral storytelling or “natural” narrative. In the paragraph above, the narrator’s indirect reportage – “Brenda knew,” “Brenda thought,” “That was how” – is continuously assimilated with (or “contaminated” by) the character’s, Brenda Nicol’s, personal idiom: “pretty attractive on the hoof,” “very much on the Mr. Clean side,” “he would come down pretty hard.” In sentences such as “*that was how she read him*” the real-life character’s supposedly original utterance (direct discourse) “this is how I read him” could be presented indirectly by the narrator as (indirect discourse) “Brenda said/ thought that this was how she understood him.” In FID it maintains, however, both the narrator’s traits (“that was how she” instead of the character’s “this is how I”) and an echo of the character’s own idiom (“*read him*”).

We can presume that the narrative voice, ultimately controlled by Mailer’s authorial skills, performs the aesthetic, literary function and that,

⁵ In this sense, as a tool for social communication, language is never “pure.” As Bakhtin noted: “Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others” (1981: 294).

⁶ Here, however, we confront one of the problematic issues prevalent in many discussions of free indirect discourse, namely the question whether FID is in any sense a *transformation* of direct discourse (DD), which is thus given the role of a primary and “original” utterance. In the tripartite schema DD-ID-FID “direct discourse generally occupies a particularly privileged position as the primary/original root or source of all indirect and free indirect transformations of an original speech act” (Aczel 1998: 478). There may be a crucial difference between fiction and nonfiction here, since nonfiction is based on actual “prior” materials of the extratextual world, materials which are transformed into a literary text.

hence, banal idiom, or cursing, belongs not to the style of the author-narrator but that of the character. Moreover, unlike Capote's *In Cold Blood* (discussed in Chapter I), Mailer's narrative text carefully eliminates all explicit signs (e.g., quotation marks) that distinguish the character's idiom from that of the narrator. Instead, *The Executioner's Song* typically consists of paragraphs like this one, with Nicole Baker as the central character or "reflector":

That was how it turned out. Nicole walked into *this funky* one-story jail, went down a couple of short corridors, passed a bunch of inmates who looked like *beer bums*, then a couple of *dudes* who whistled as she went by, twirled their mustaches, showed a bicep, *generally acted like the cat's ass*. (ES 298; my emphases)

While direct discourse (DD) corresponds to "direct" *reproduction* of other people's utterances, indirect discourse (ID) and free indirect discourse (FID) are, rather, modes of their *representation*. As Fludernik notes, "the rendering [of other people's utterances] can only be mediate, warped, through a syntactic and rhetorical filter which inherently distorts the self-identity of the original" (1993: 16). The narrative mode of Mailer's book is based more on ID and FID than on DD, so that the "original" utterances of real-life characters are mediated and filtered through an artificial voice. This voice is an aesthetic construction governed by the artistically self-conscious author-narrator. What distinguishes the *production* of this kind of factual narrative from a fictional one is (as noted in Chapter I) the fact that Mailer's "true life story, with its real names and real lives" (ES 1053), is "built" upon and "made" of those "fifteen thousand pages" of "the collected transcript of every last recorded bit of talk" with "more than one hundred people [who] were interviewed face to face" (ES 1051). The "Western Voices" and the "Eastern Voices" of *The Executioner's Song* therefore emerge from taped interviews; these real-life *voices* are the actual material upon which the book is constructed.

As mentioned previously, behind this construction a self-conscious novelist still exercises his craft. In Mailer's text the speaking style of the characters, while keeping their own characteristic idiom, is merged with the authorial narrative style. The *vernacular* and the *colloquial* in the people's utterances reveal their own, subjective voice and attitude, while the style of the author-narrator is more visibly "literary." As Fludernik points out, "[p]urely emphatic constructions, [...] are less colloquial than merely rhetorical and can frequently also be encountered in the narrator's more literary style" (1993: 257). As suggested above, *The Executioner's Song* is to a large extent a narrative which renders characters' speech acts (thus representing

the mode of free indirect *speech*), and Mailer's narrative also directs us to distinguish between the narrator's more "well-spoken" style and the characters' everyday dialect. What Franz Stanzel calls "the colloquialization of the narrator's language" is apparently a commonplace in first-person narration (see 1984 [1979]: 194). More crucial examples have been provided by some modernist and postmodernist novels, such as Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, where the style of the authorial narrator occasionally merges with that of the characters (cf. Hägg 2005: 97-100). In Bakhtin's words, the novel makes its social heteroglossia, its array of individual voices, the prerequisite for authentic novelistic prose (see 1981: 264). The "novelistic" sense of *The Executioner's Song* also springs from Mailer's early experiments in the field of American literary naturalism, beginning with *The Naked and the Dead*. In his first novel Mailer was strongly influenced by Dos Passos's experimental techniques, like the intensive use of FID to convey the distinct social voices of modern America.⁷ In *Executioner*, American voices are "naturalistically" gathered and critically juxtaposed through imitation and stylization of oral communication (see Pizer 1993: 176-181).⁸ In a sense the book is a factual realization of Mailer's earlier, both realistic and fabulistic fictions which play with styles, voices, and discourses of contemporary America.⁹

As suggested above, the language of *The Executioner's Song* appears to "grow" out of the soil of Utah. This is, of course, a Mormon world suffused by religious (Christian) discourse. For an individual consciousness language is not an abstract system but, as Bakhtin phrases it, "rather a concrete het-

⁷ Brian McHale's seminal article on free indirect discourse takes its main examples from Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy, focusing among other things on "markers of colloquialism" and "the quality of 'spokenness'" which, through the reader's interpretation, may constitute FID (see 1978: 269).

⁸ This kind of colloquial use of FID comes close to the Russian mode of *skaz* which is "a stylization of the various forms of oral everyday narration" (Bakhtin 1981: 262) or "a form of storytelling that imitates, parodies and stylizes oral storytelling" (Fludernik 1993: 107). Apparently, the *skaz*-like narration is most famously represented on the American literary scene by *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the novel which established the vernacular and colloquial as a new and "authentic" American prose style. As suggested above, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* is a kind of "postmodernized" version of Mark Twain's classic. David Lodge, when discussing "novels in which the discourse of the characterized narrator is doubly-oriented," takes Mailer's "Vietnam" novel as an example of "parodic *skaz*" (1990: 41). According to one critic, in *Why Are We in Vietnam?* Mailer "manages to expand his narrator's voice into a polyphonic, polymorphous choir of American speech" (Radford 1983: 228). In *The Naked and the Dead* Mailer constructs a fictional gallery of American men with their distinct styles of colloquial speech; a similar device is used in the Finnish classic war novel, Väinö Linna's *The Unknown Soldier* (1954).

⁹ Elizabeth Hardwick even suggests that Mailer's artistic shaping of spoken material in *The Executioner's Song* results in "the apotheosis of [America's] flourishing 'oral literature' thus far" (1999: 341).

eroglot conception of the world” (1981: 293).¹⁰ The famous first paragraph of Mailer’s long narrative introduces the reader to the world of the story, but also to the specific style and technique of the book, its conversational tone and interview-based discourse:

Brenda was six when she fell out of *the apple tree*. She climbed to the top and the limb with the good apples broke off. Gary caught her as the branch came scraping down. They were scared. The apple trees were their grandmother’s best crop and *it was forbidden to climb in the orchard*. She helped him drag away the tree limb and they hoped no one would notice. That was Brenda’s earliest recollection of Gary.

She was six and he was seven and she thought he was swell. [...] (ES 5; my emphases)

This short memoir by Brenda sets the tone for the narrative. It consists of the character’s personal reflections (*the apple tree*; the *good apples*; came *scraping* down; *that was*) and speech habits (“he was *swell*”) inside the narrator’s overall presentation. In addition, the much-used white spaces between the paragraphs indicate either a pause in the speech/thought or a change of tone/viewpoint.

As Frus shrewdly points out, however, we cannot be sure that all language belongs to Brenda here (or to the narrator, for that matter): “For example, ‘it was forbidden to climb in the orchard’ sounds more like the Old Testament God of the Mormons than a phrase Brenda might use” (1994: 186). As Bakhtin has noted in his theories of the social nature of consciousness, even “inner speech” is not really inner, for “[i]t is a voice that is part of the continuing dialogue that we have with other individuals in the culture within which we live” (Palmer 2002: 39). The use of FID can reflect the larger theme of the narrative – in this sense, *The Executioner’s Song* is a narrative as much about American voices as about Gary Gilmore’s life and death:

This is how our “character” is formed, Mailer’s everyday, familiar idiom says; we are all products of culture, subjects of structures – of language, family patterns, derived from the mass media, and other sources. Our customary habits of language use are not uniquely ours but produce us, cause us to appear as we do. The whole problem of the fragmented ego, the self as alienated subject, is here troped by the structure and style of the narration. (Frus 1994: 187)

According to Hans Bertens’s postmodernist reading of *The Executioner’s Song*, language reveals another language or, more broadly, another dis-

¹⁰ In Bakhtin’s terminology, *heteroglossia* means the presence of “another’s speech in another’s language”, and this phenomenon “constitutes a special type of double-voiced discourse” (Fludernik 1993: 324; see Bakhtin 1981: 324).

course, and “since discourse is by its nature public, such characters [as Gary Gilmore] are, properly speaking, not subjects, but part of the language that surrounds them” (1987: 148). Another early paragraph in the narrative makes Brenda connect Gary’s eyes to those of the “rabbits she had flushed.” She seems to add, in the interview rendered as a narrative focalized by her, that “scared-rabbit was the common expression” (ES 16), thus explaining the phenomenon either to herself or to the interviewer through the cognitive frame of “common expression.” This kind of language does not in any clear sense represent the *narrator’s* voice, for “he” appears to be an outsider in this “western” culture, as though representing Mailer’s own (intellectual, Jewish, literary, and “eastern”) position. Still, in many separate paragraphs it is quite difficult to distinguish the narrator’s voice from those of the characters or from the common, social language inside which everyone speaks, including the narrator.

The indeterminate form of FID activates the reader’s response: the reader must “fill” in the scene where the narrator’s voice and the character’s vision meet in an ambiguous way. As Frus suggests, the process of free indirect discourse models a *reflexive reading*. In her analysis of Stephen Crane’s journalistic-fictional practice and its employment of FID, she notes that “[t]he free indirect discourse allows the reader a place and reminds her that the narrative itself interprets events by giving two perspectives on them” (1994: 51). This notion of the narrative itself interpreting events is connected with both the narrative’s self-reflexivity and its way of constructing the reader’s position. If we argue, then, that certain narratives may themselves be interpreting their events, we may see that the *form* of a literary work is always in some relation to its *content*. In this way, the occurrence of free indirect discourse often has some connection to the text’s thematics or “ideology.” The possible ambiguities of voice, form, and irony present in FID “depend on the individual text, on its style, its characters, its themes and its situations” (Fludernik 1993: 81). Therefore, the reader, “induced by one or more signals to distinguish instances of FID, is compelled to ‘make sense’ of their presence in the literary text, to ascribe meaning or purpose to them” (McHale 1978: 274). It is because of these crucial notions stressed by both classical and cognitive narratologists that we need to turn to individual texts which construct modes like FID for their own functions and purposes.¹¹

¹¹ However, there is no reason to overlook possible *formal* properties of FID and to veer toward reductively *ideological* readings of FID (see also Fludernik 1993: 12, 82; Cohn 1999: 166, 178-79). As Bakhtin puts it in his long essay “Discourse in the Novel,” “the study of verbal art can and must overcome the divorce between an abstract ‘formal’ approach and an equally abstract ‘ideological’ approach” (1981: 259). Phelan argues that “beginning with form and moving to ideology is less likely to lead us away

As a narrative which not only (fictionally) imitates but also (nonfictionally) employs real-life social and cultural voices, *The Executioner's Song* can be read as a kind of concretization of what Bakhtin calls “*sociological stylistics*” (1981: 300). When discussing social dialogues and styles (especially as they appear in Edith Wharton’s novel *The House of Mirth*), David Herman suggests that “the novel’s proliferation of styles, its polyphony of voices, functions to show that who engages in what style is a matter of culture, not nature” (2002: 205). In the same vein, James Phelan’s analysis of Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* aims to develop “a rhetorical analysis of voice,” paying specific attention to the notion that “voice is as much a social phenomenon as it is an individual one” (1996: 44). *The Executioner's Song* brings different social dialogues, styles, and voices into conflict. What makes the book’s narrative discourse often ambiguous and indeterminate is the reader’s uncertainty about the voice of the narrator, including the more complex question whether the narrator’s voice somehow corresponds to the author’s ideological “voice.” In any case, whereas (real-life) characters speak in their own styles – sometimes representing Mailer’s principle that “style is character” – the author-narrator’s voice and style only emerges as language. As Phelan defines it from the rhetorical viewpoint, *voice* is a fusion of style, tone, and values existing in the space between style and character. Voice may have a mimetic dimension, but it needs to have a mimetic function; thus, while voice exists as a trait of some speaker, in many narratives with an “absent” or “silent” author-narrator “the voice of the narrator will be his or her only trait” (ibid.: 45, 47-48). As suggested above, this seeming silence or self-effacement of the author-narrator is a new and striking phenomenon in Mailer’s work, which has previously been constructed on a notion of the combination of character and style, producing a distinct narrative voice with style, tone, and values of its own.

According to Kathy Mezei, the undecidability inherent in the form and structure of FID constructs a site for a textual battle or complicated interchange between author, narrator, character-focalizer, and reader.¹² Mezei

from the details of the text than beginning with general ideological categories,” because “beginning with form gives a much more solid base upon which to construct our ideological analyses” (2003: 86).

¹² For example, questions concerning social and, especially in Mezei’s analysis, gender indeterminacies are metaphorically reflected in the very indeterminacy of FID (see 1996: 67). It has been suggested that the occurrences of FID may serve as a *mise en abyme* of the entire text, which means that FID is a kind of embedded construction that mirrors and reflects the text as a whole (see ibid.: 70). In this way FID can also function as a guide for the reader in his or her attempts at interpreting a given narrative text, and thus it “models a reflexive reading” (Frus 1994: 50). Compare also Rimmon-Kenan’s point that FID “gains the status of a miniature reflection of the nature of all texts and all language” (1983: 115).

speaks of the “destabilization of the reader through the indeterminacy created by FID,” pointing toward a narratological hypothesis according to which it is not only the reader who constructs a narrative text, but the reader him- or herself is also always partly “constructed” by that narrative text (see 1996: 75; cf. Gunn 2004: 43). On the other hand, Frus sees that *The Executioner’s Song* remains open to multiple interpretations, ultimately “calling upon the reader to create the text along with the narrator” (1994: 186). In Mailer’s narrative the narrator becomes, to some extent and along with the actual reader, a reader of the characters’ minds, often remaining uncertain of his surmises about them and consciously incapable of solving their enigmas. The book thus raises the ethical and epistemological problem of other people’s minds and lives; a problem thematized when the characters also attempt to “read” each other (as in “that was how she read him”). In this sense the use of free indirect discourse helps to bridge the form and content of the narrative, for this is a narrative about indeterminacy, ambiguity, and dual voices.

“*American Virtue*”: Mailer’s Thematics

In *The Executioner’s Song* the surface level of the narrative does not seem to provide any coherent vision to the reader. Instead, the ideas and themes – the basis of art of the book – are to be sought, organized and interpreted by the reader with the help of authorial guidelines, stylistic signs, recurring motifs, symbols, and patterns. Through its story and language, *Executioner* tells something real and at the same time something metaphorical about America. A major theme of the book, associated with its original working title “*American Virtue*” (e.g., Lennon [ed.] 1988: 239), is America’s near-loss of its innocence, style, and imagination.

The Artist as Recorder

As noted above, the most striking aspect in *The Executioner’s Song* is that Mailer’s personal voice is here largely replaced by the “flat” or “banal” language. The style of the book appears to be radically different from that of the earlier Mailer. Chris Anderson, for example, asks: “Where are the nuances, the complexities, the metaphorical stunts of *Fire* and *Armies*? Where is the intensely self-reflexive, philosophizing narrator, the narrator filtering all experience through his own peculiar and passionate sensibility?” (1987:

119). The characteristically Mailerian style and rhetoric, visible in his earlier nonfiction, is in a way turned into its opposite. The strongly personal and subjective “ruminating” of previous works is absent, and what we hear is the voice and style of “recording,” as if there were a metaphorical tape recorder taking in all spoken material. The author’s function appears to be limited to a purely technical gathering of documentary material, and the narrative as a whole sustains an illusion that the story is being told by the people who knew Gilmore (see Tabbi 1995: 182; cf. Booth 1988: 206; Conn 1989: 528-29). Hardwick reflects upon the distinction between the actual interviews which are recorded on tape and Mailer’s “creation” of voices, and suggests that this kind of literary art is not so much imaginative creation as it is artistic transformation of spoken materials in loyalty to “informants.” One can go so far as to say that the artistically realized “plainness” and “flatness” of *Executioner* is antithetical to Mailer’s characteristic style: “Mailer is a river of words, ornamental, evocative words, and cascading notions and designs. There is no plainness, flatness in him, but there is, was, a lot, in the tapes” (Hardwick 1999: 341). This agenda of documentation and recording, with only little hints of narrative organization, is implicitly announced at the very beginning of the narrative, where separate paragraphs are used to indicate different speakers and different points of view following each other.

The Executioner’s Song consequently creates an illusion that the large amount of factual material is only being gathered and casually selected and put together: “It’s as if Mailer, rather than writing a book, chooses to present us with the material he would have to work from in writing a book” (Anderson 1987: 121). Furthermore, *Executioner* gives a feeling of a “narratorless narration,” in which there are only “reflector-characters” giving their subjective perspectives on the events in their own terms. The extended use of free indirect discourse in the narrative means that the authorial narration seems to be replaced by what Stanzel calls the *figural narrative situation*. In the figural narrative situation FID “actually ceases to be an expression of a ‘dual voice,’ because the authorial voice in it is for all practical purposes no longer audible,” and this transition from the “authorial” to the “figural” level may also signify a “gradual transformation of an authorial narrator into an anonymous figural medium” (1984 [1979]: 198). As Fludernik notes, on the basis of Ann Banfield’s linguistic theory, “in *pure* reflector mode narrative there cannot be any indication of a narrative voice” (1993: 443; cf. Palmer 2004: 17). Yet the narrative stance of *Executioner* is, rather, reminiscent of the modernist “objective” or “camera-eye” narrator, who is not supposed to enter any character’s mind but is only to record the characters’ behavior and outlook. This kind of narrator, who seems only

to be listening to the characters' speech, was perfected by Hemingway in short stories such as "Hills Like White Elephants," another depiction of the "whiteness" of the world and people's inability to communicate. This narrator-type need not necessarily be associated with visual observation (photographic or cinematic) but may evoke the illusion of an audiotape recorder transcribing the dialogue.¹³ As Seymour Chatman suggests, the objective narrator may present only written documents, such as letters, and in a sense "this kind of narrator functions like a fax machine or manuscript copyist" (1998: 908). In fact, not only is Mailer's book written on the basis of recorded and transcribed materials, and not only does it present its selected and organized documents as if objectively, but the act of using a copy machine is a motif in the narrative, a motif that belongs to the semantic field of the whiteness and sameness of the world.

It is as if Mailer's *magnum opus* revises "the great American novel" of the twentieth century as intertextual *and* nonfictional, bringing the whole of America, its voices and discourses, together: "Mailer's enormous book is made of small sections typographically separated from one another by spaces" and "[i]n this it enacts a kind of intertextuality, even going so far as to have some chapters virtually composed of juxtaposed texts" (Schleifer 1989: 135). In his "montage of voices" in *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer "has assembled a new repertoire of literary devices through which he mounts a panoramic documentary on American culture" (Radford 1983: 223; cf. Dickstein 2002: 160). In a way, the "flat" style of the narrative reflects the flat, two-dimensional, and superficial reality created by the media, especially television.¹⁴ That the narrative voice of *Executioner* is actually a carefully formed aesthetic construction is suggested by Didion, who notes that Mailer's narration has a new tone and mode, with "a meticulously limited vocabulary and a voice as flat as the horizon" (1998 [1979]: 336). It seems that the appreciation of *Executioner* requires that the reader should know the author and his other work. The very technique of using points

¹³ Mas'ud Zavarzadeh recognizes a new kind of nonfiction novel which seems to have no author and at the same time many authors. This mode "has developed because of the manipulation in literature of current technological devices such as the tape recorder which eliminate the conventional 'author' and bring into being a type of narrative in which the testimony of the 'narrator' reaches the reader without being filtered through the mind of an official 'author'" (1976: 177).

¹⁴ "By 'flat' writing, I refer to a poetic that emulates the flat image rather than the 'art' image, and that, on the contrary, absorbs the other meaning of 'flat' – vulgar, banal. [...] In Proust, whose ambivalent relationship to modern technology is well known, flatness becomes the two-dimensionality of literature's written page, art's two-dimensionality, the reproducible, flat, glossy image of the photograph, all at the same time" (Bal 2000: 488).

of view, variable focalization, filters, and centers of consciousness creates a novelistic texture, where the documentary material is brought together with an imaginative and artistic narrative. As Didion argues, it is through the book's limited narrative voice, serving technical and aesthetic purposes, that a new kind of vision of the West may emerge, and that voice also succeeds in turning "life" into "literature."¹⁵ In this sense Mailer also appears to create meaning out of the "void," out of a meaningless and spiritually empty atmosphere.

Though Mailer's narrative produces an illusion of a tape recorder carefully documenting the speech of real-life characters, making transcriptions of their discourse, this recording and transcribing also involves selection, ordering, and organizing of factual materials into a literary artifact. For example, in Bakhtin's definition of an artistic arrangement of social speech types and individual voices, there is always an author figure behind the scenes.¹⁶ It has been suggested that Bakhtin's notion of dialogism alludes to "the composer's creative activity when ordering the different musical voices into one score, the symphonic whole" (Mey 2000: 159). As Richard Aczel argues in his analysis of Bakhtin's notion of "voice":

While insisting on the influence of heteroglossia on all speech, Bakhtin singles out the novel as the artistic genre in which "words that are already populated with the social intentions of others" are compelled to "serve a second master," to refract the intentions of the "artist" himself. In the novel, "diversity of voices and heteroglossia" are organized by the writing subject "into a structured artistic system." The novel is "a diversity of social speech types... artistically organized." (1998: 483; see Bakhtin 1981: 262, 300)

In a sense, the absence of the author is a great presence in Mailer's book, and consequently Mailer's voice and stance emerges through the "documentary" surface of the narrative. An authorial figure keeps the narrative's complex structure together, so that "the central figure in [*Executioner*], as always in Mailer's work, is Mailer: choosing, selecting, editing, brooding,

¹⁵ Didion's thoughts here are interestingly connected with her own work of literary nonfiction, *The White Album*, published in the same year as Mailer's book. Didion writes in her book: "The frontier had been reinvented, and its shape was the subdivision, that new free land on which all settlers could recast their lives *tabula rasa*" (1979: 181). As Lounsberry suggests, "Didion implies that these flat, white spaces produce the same mesmerizing trenches as the bleached California sky" and that "truth is ambiguous white in *The White Album*" (1990: 124, 130).

¹⁶ Daniel P. Gunn shows how Bakhtin emphasizes artistic control as the context within which heteroglossia operates in the novel. In this sense, the double-voiced effect in free indirect discourse creates neither instability nor thematic ambiguity, but belongs to the larger artistic organization (see Gunn 2004: 42-43).

writing” (Conn 1989: 529). As various critics have noted, the deepest sub-text of *The Executioner’s Song* is Mailer’s own romantic and existentialist aesthetics which finally connects this book to the author’s overall corpus and its prevailing thematic patterns. As Joseph Tabbi puts it, “Mailer has not eliminated himself from the narrative; he has only situated himself *inside* its material”; therefore, “we are very much aware of the author who has self-consciously shaped the sentences” (1995: 181-82). Mailer is thus “very much the creator, shaping his material rather than merely recording fact” (Scheffler 1986 [1983]: 184), he is present in “the rhythmical shapings that he gives to the paragraphs” (Edmundson 1990: 441), and “we find the author in a bit of staging such as, ‘In the mountains, the snow was iron gray and purple in the hollows, and glowed like gold on every slope that faced the sun’” (Hardwick 1999: 339; see ES 16).

The Executioner’s Song is filled with different kinds of “texts,” from grand myths to tiny ditties, that in various ways reflect the story of Gary Gilmore. The embedded texts are usually functional rather than merely contingent. We may wonder whether these texts are based on facts because their effect is so strong that the facts seem to have conspired in its production. For example, Gilmore’s last silent journey to the place of execution is framed by a sentimental hit song of the time, “La Paloma Blanca”: “Una paloma blanca, I’m just a bird in the sky. Una paloma blanca, over the mountains I fly.” The song rather visibly mirrors Gary’s fateful story:

As they drove along slowly, and the song played, Father Meersman noticed that Gary no longer looked at the picture [of Nicole]. It was as if the words had become more important.

*Once I had my share of losing,
Once they locked me on a chain,
Yes, they tried to break my power,
Oh, I still can feel the pain.*

No one spoke any longer and the song played through.

*No one can take my freedom away,
Yes, no one can take my freedom away.
(ES 975-76)*

Of course, other people besides Gary might confirm that yes, this was the song playing on the radio that morning; in any case, its placement in the narrative at this very point is so emotionally overwhelming that the last thing the reader thinks of doing is to check the source.

When discussing *The Executioner's Song*, Robert Merrill suggests that it seems that the book's sheer length has discouraged many critics from considering the work's overall structure and its informing themes. As Merrill rightly argues, in considering the meanings and thematic organization of a literary work, we should, at least partly, take into account the authorial intention. Thus the original working title of the book, "American Virtue," "should lead us to reconsider Mailer's thematic intentions in general, intentions all too often downplayed because Mailer himself is so conspicuously 'absent' from this huge book" (1992: 152). It can be suggested that the open and fragmented form of the narrative asks the reader to fill in its gaps and blanks, to provide interpretation, and to construct meaning. *Executioner* appears to be the main instance in Merrill's argument about the importance of literary structure in Mailer's overall work. As I argue, the narrative form of this seemingly fragmented and documentary book is a key to its literary value.

Narrativization, Motivation, Interpretation

Mailer's narrative uses different modes of *thematization*, *motivation*, *narrativization*, and *naturalization*; it also encourages the reader to use similar procedures. In Jonathan Culler's terminology, 'naturalization' means that something "strange and deviant is brought within a discursive order and thus made to seem natural"; as Culler suggests, "we can always make the meaningless meaningful by production of an appropriate context" (1975: 137-38). To naturalize is to make the text intelligible by relating it to various models of *coherence*: "[a]n element [is] motivated if it [has] a function in the literary text, and in principle everything in a successful work of art should be motivated" (ibid.: 159). Of course, a less formalist reading (for instance, one informed by deconstructionist agenda) would not seek thematic or aesthetic motivation for every gap or blank in a narrative text.¹⁷

The seeming paradox in Mailer's most postmodernist work of nonfiction is that the "natural" (people's everyday life) is turned into something

¹⁷ From an aesthetic viewpoint, however, "[i]t is desirable that interpretations should be consistent, comprehensive and discriminating because then they prove to the reader that a work is coherent and complex and that all its parts are functional," and therefore, "[a] work of literature is coherent if, and only if, it is possible to produce a consistent interpretation of it" (Olsen 1978: 159, 174). Whether or not *The Executioner's Song* is totally *coherent* in the sense that all its parts are functional (and I would contend that they are not, because of the very vastness and complexity of the material), I would argue that it is intentionally *complex* in its narrative structure and thereby provides various interpretive possibilities.

“strange” so that it needs to be provided with a meaning through the process of naturalization and motivation. According to Fludernik’s cognitive-narratological argument, readers, when confronted with potentially unreadable narratives that are radically inconsistent, “attempt to re-cognize what they find in the text in terms of the natural telling or experiencing or viewing parameters” (1996: 34). Thus Fludernik, drawing from Culler’s concept of ‘naturalization,’ suggests that readers are able to ‘narrativize’ even experimental narratives using the basic cognitive frames of telling, experiencing, or reflecting. As some cognitive theories of narrative have stressed, readers respond to any literary text by interpreting the characters and events of the narrative according to certain *frames*, *scripts*, and *schemas*, in particular frames derived from the real world and its physical perception (e.g., Jahn 1997: 441-42). “Story logic” in the title of David Herman’s study refers to the logic by virtue of which people know when, how, and why to use stories to enable them to find their way in the world; thus, “story logic is a powerful tool for rendering the world cognizable, manageable, and memorable” (2002: 24). The reader of *The Executioner’s Song* experiences the narrative world partly through the narrative’s strong mimetic links to real-life schemes, but also through the experiences of the narrative’s “real-life” characters who tell, observe, view, and reflect that world according to their reality experience and cultural knowing, trying to make the world understandable to themselves.

One tends to agree with Fludernik that life is “messy and disorderly, so that literature must not present too neat, too artistic a picture of it,” and thus “the unexpected in oral narrative not only constitutes the life blood of narrative, its tellability; it is structurally central to the shape of experience” (1996: 32). She also notes that “in Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* trilogy not all the strands of settings and characters come together to produce one big consistent mosaic” (ibid.: 279). According to *The Executioner’s Song*, “life” (and all the material it consists of) is not easily subjected to coherent “artistic” frames. Mailer’s narrative may appear, at first sight, radically inconsistent and problematic, reflecting as it does the complex process of transforming actual oral narratives into a coherent literary work. But an analysis of complex literary works cannot be reduced to our general use of those frames and schemas that help us to understand our real-life experiences: there is usually some artifice and some “uncanny” in literary narratives (including literary nonfiction), and their interpretation requires a prior knowledge of literary traditions and generic conventions. Cognitive theories typically insist that “understanding long, detailed, and formally sophisticated literary narratives is for many people a natural, seemingly automatic process” (Herman 2002:

1). All texts and images require a certain amount of cognitive “processing” in order to be interpreted, but “the richer forms depend on the resonance in the reader’s mind of the aesthetic features of text: plot, narrative presentation, images, and style” (Ryan 2001: 96). While ‘naturalization’ involves the reader’s interpretation of (inter)textual elements, what Fludernik calls ‘narrativization’ depends upon “natural” cognitive frames by means of which literary texts are interpreted.

While *The Executioner’s Song* transcribes a large amount of documentary material into meaningful and coherent patterns and structures, in its “postmodernist” stance it also suggests that the world of reality is not that easily transformed into the world of a book (see also Reed 1992: 21). And while its style also reflects the demands set by the actual materials, this documentary “flatness” and the seeming lack of organization are illusory. On a rereading we may see typical Mailerian features behind this large organization, both narrative “macrostructures” and “microstructures” that constitute the style and meaning of this large book. If the story belongs to the macrostructure, ‘motifs’ can be grasped as narrative microstructures inside fictional worlds. As the tradition of Russian formalism (especially the work of Tomashevsky) suggests, the motif is the smallest element of the story, but it can be transformed and it can move into new contexts. Mailer’s self-conscious attempt to give a “novelistic” flair and “narrative” flavor to his meticulously documented *Executioner* is an example of a nonfictional narrative telling its story within the frame of a carefully constructed and poetically realized narrative world. At the beginning of Mailer’s narrative, motifs and images like “an apple tree” or “a ridge of a mountain” evolve from small to large ones, from “static” to “dynamic,” calling for complex interpretations in different contexts. It is important to note that motifs are represented in the larger texture: “Texture is the exact form of expression, the original wording in which the motif appears in the literary text” (Doležel 1998a: 36). Thus the meanings of the motif of the apple tree accrue in the environments created by different other motifs.

The narrative structure of Mailer’s long book is based on a careful temporal ordering with an occasional use of *paralepsis* – the narrator suggesting something that he could not know at the given point in the story and that the characters themselves cannot know. Anticipations like these “may serve to generate tension or to express a fatalistic vision of life” (Bal 1997: 95). The knowledge of the coming events actually belongs to a different epistemological/ontological level in nonfiction as compared to fiction, since the events of the world of nonfiction have already happened. In *The Executioner’s Song* Mailer, however, plays with novelistic conventions by

creating tension, suspense, anticipation, and strong determination, in the style of Capote's *In Cold Blood* (as discussed in Chapter I). In an early scene where Gary Gilmore has just been introduced to the narrative audience, the poetic scenery surrounding his journey to Provo is given a clear symbolic significance:

Half an hour later, driving home, they went by Point of the Mountain. Off to the left of the Interstate a long hill came out of the mountains and its ridge was like the limb of a beast whose paw just reached the highway. On the other side, in the desert to the right, was Utah State Prison. There were only a few lights in its buildings now. They made jokes about Utah State Prison. (ES 15; my emphasis)

Later, the same vision returns to the narrative, but now Gary is already imprisoned: "Outside the prison, night had come, and *the ridge of the mountain came down to the Interstate like a big dark animal laying out its paw*" (ES 451; my emphasis). It can be argued that *Executioner* "takes its place along with other Mailer works in exploring the same dichotomies of light and darkness, reason and instinct, clarity and mystery" (Scheffler 1986 [1983]: 184). Even the chapter titles of the book are characteristically Mailerian: "*The Angels and the Demons Meet the Devils and the Saints*" (ES 917). It is actually Gary himself who represents typical Mailerian imagery with angels and demons in his prison prose, as in his most haunting and emotional letter to Nicole:

No, I ain't drunk or loaded or nothing this is just me writing this letter that lacks beauty – just me Gary Gilmore thief and murderer. Crazy Gary. Who will one day have a dream that he was a guy named GARY in twentieth century America and that there was something very wrong [...]. And he'll remember that there was something very beautiful too in that long ago Mormon mountain Empire and he'll begin to dream of a dark red-haired sort of green eyed elfin fox. (ES 360)

Gary believes that Nicole is an embodiment of a simple, clean truth for him: "*I was looking for a truth that was very rigid, unbending, a single straight line that excluded everything but itself. A simple Truth, plain, unadorned. [...] And one day I was fortunate. I saw a simple, quiet Truth, a profound, deep, and personal Truth of beauty and love*" (ES 345-46). Nicole's responses in her letters (some of them written after her suicide attempt) are even more heartbreaking, because she freely accepts Gary's "truth": "*Darlin lites are out. i can jest barely see these lines. Touch my soul with your truth... Forevermore NICOLE*" (ES 699).

Nicole, clearly, is not an embodiment of such a simple, elf-like purity as Gary wants to impose on her. Rather, she has gone through harsh experience in her life, meeting the wrong men and leaving them, facing violence

and injustice, and being committed to the mental hospital. While Gary projects “romantic attitudes and values through his charismatic force of personality, his emphasis on the importance of courage, [and] his existential view of death,” Nicole demonstrates “great spirit, strength, and resilience” and has “the necessary freedom of spirit to fulfill Mailer’s idea of the true existentialist” (Wenke 1987: 203, 213). While writing letters in prison is Gary’s way of self-creation, he simultaneously aims at “creating” Nicole, insisting that their relationship is a product of *karma* and reincarnation, a reunion after a separation in their previous lives. This private philosophy is clearly connected with Mailer’s own scheme, which obviously also means that Mailer constructs Gilmore as a “Mailerian” character; these “karmic” beliefs in *Executioner* resonate with *Marilyn* and *The Fight*. In the tradition of Jewish mysticism, all souls pre-exist, and descend into mundane bodies to complete their mission on earth; this resembles a belief in “karmic balance,” according to which human beings come into the world with a soul that carries an impost of guilt and reward from the past (see Gerson 1986 [1982]: 176). Gary’s strong wish to be executed is connected with his belief that there will be another life, which may be a reward or a punishment of this life: “*Thats what they call it – death. Its just a release – a change of form*” (ES 884).

As some critics have noted, the depth and complexity of Mailer’s book may only emerge through rereading.¹⁸ Even Wayne Booth, hardly one of the most insightful readers of *The Executioner’s Song*, admits that a more informed re-reading sheds new light on Mailer’s ways of organizing his large narrative: “In re-reading Mailer’s ‘simple’ beginning, I can choose to slow down and think a bit about his intent in starting his story with the innocence of *apple* trees and guilty actions – ah, yes, this is the garden of Eden” (1988: 208; cf. Coale 1985: 37). As John Whalen-Bridge suggests, Mailer’s way of opening his narrative with a figure of the mythical Fall not only creates sympathy toward Gary but also puts him in the Adamic role in the larger romantic context, even enclosing him “within the ultimately forgiving myths of American literature” (1998: 107).¹⁹ On the one hand, as suggested

¹⁸ Matei Calinescu discusses rereading and “reflective rereading” as “[a] rediscovery of an already known text from a different vantage point, for example its reconsideration within intertextual frames whose relevance becomes clear only after the completion of a first reading” (1993: xiv, 8). As Leona Toker suggests, “the difference between the first and the repeated readings is qualitative: on the first reading certain attitudes are elicited and processed; on a rereading, these attitudes are rejected or modified” (1993: 8).

¹⁹ Whalen-Bridge even argues that besides the larger “Adamic” and romantic context of American literature, Gary and Brenda’s childhood scene can be interpreted as alluding to specific literary texts in the American canon: “Gary and Brenda are resonant of Quentin and Caddy Compson [in *The Sound and the Fury*], and Gary catching his cousin refigures Holden Caulfield catching his little sister Phoebe [in *Catcher in the Rye*]” (1998: 108).

above, there is some “culturally inscribed” connection between an apple tree and an Edenic childhood innocence implied in the narrative and quite easily interpreted accordingly by the reader living in a given culture. On the other hand, there are romantic and mythic themes typical of Mailer that organize the narrative from its very beginning. We may note, then, that the figure and motif of the apple tree returns to the narrative through Nicole’s remembrance of her little house and garden: “In the backyard was a groovy old apple tree with a couple of rusty wires to hold the branches together. She loved it. The tree looked like one of those stray mutts that doesn’t get attention and doesn’t care – it’s still beautiful” (ES 71). Apparently, in Mailer’s narrative Nicole represents enduring hope and ultimate strength, and she lasts despite continuing personal suffering and the world’s cruelty, being the narrative’s human center.

As I have argued, the seeming meaninglessness becomes the very theme of Mailer’s narrative, concerning not only Gilmore but almost everything surrounding him. Early in the narrative, the enigmatic void and emptiness of Gary’s mind, his eyes and presence, is metonymically associated with the whiteness of the snow and the bareness of the mountains. These images become symbolic and metaphorical figures, as seen and felt through Brenda’s attitude: “It was time to recognize, Brenda decided gloomily, that when you had Gary around, there were questions for which you would not get answers. The snow kept coming down. Out on the roads, *the universe would be just one big white field*” (ES 48; my emphasis). As Anderson also interprets this passage, “the focus on the snow and the whiteness of the fields is novelistic, [...]. It is metaphorical: the universe is like a white field. [...] The white field seems a metaphor of vastness and meaninglessness” (1987: 123). When imprisoned, Gary begins to send poems to Nicole, including one poem by Shelley, which can reflect the theme of the narrative as a whole:

Here’s some verses from the Sensitive Plant. It’s by Percy Bysshe Shelley:

*And the leaves, brown, yellow and gray, and red
and white with the whiteness of what is dead,
like troops of ghosts on the dry wind passed;
Their whistling noise made the birds aghast.*

*I dare not guess; but in this life
Of error, ignorance, and strife,
Where nothing is, but all things seem,
And we the shadows of the dream. (ES 477)²⁰*

²⁰ Gary ironically comments on the newspapers’ way of misrepresenting him as a “pretty good” poet: “Gary laughed. ‘It’s a poem by Shelley called ‘The Sensitive Plant’,’ he said. ‘Dammit, Schiller, that’s real stupidity on the part of *Newsweek*. Anyone who recognizes the poem is going to think I was pretending to write it myself’” (ES 668).

The idea of the whiteness and nothingness, created in Shelley's poem, finds its echo in the chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale" in Melville's *Moby-Dick*. The narrator, or Ishmael, contemplates, in connection with the Whale, "the heartless voids and immensities of the universe" and "a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscapes of snows" (Melville 1951 [1851]: 170). Once again, we may note the importance of Melville's novel as *the* subtext in Mailer's literary imagination. According to Richard Chase's analysis of this section from *Moby-Dick*,

[w]hiteness is the paradoxical color, the color that involves all the contradictions Melville attributes to nature. It signifies death and corruption as readily as virginal purity, innocence, and youth. It has the advantage of being, from one point of view, the color that contains all colors, whereas from another point of view, it suggests a *tabula rasa* which may be imaginatively endowed with significance according to the desire or obsession of him who beholds it. (1980 [1957]: 110-11)

In a phenomenological sense, the world of *The Executioner's Song* may be "white," but its whiteness is always connected to the perceiving subject's intentional acts in respect to that world. Whereas the beginning of the narrative with the motif of the apple tree constructs figures of purity, virginity, youth, and innocence, the ensuing narrative constructs whiteness as a figure of emptiness and death. However, in the early pages of the book anything can happen; Gilmore's presence is a kind of *tabula rasa* which can be endowed with significance, even though it finally eludes both Brenda and the media people.

Our interpretative choice to read a text as a work of literary art means that we aim at seeing its separate figures and motifs as meaningful:

The reader who assumes as a part of his interpretation that the text is a literary work, will be likely to look on the fog [in Dickens] as a thematic or structural feature linking certain scenes and places, and to look for the symbolic value of the fog. To interpret a text as literary work means among other things that one is willing to assume that a detail like the fog is *intended* to have meaning, and to read the text as a literary work is to try to discover this meaning. (Olsen 1978: 46-47)

As Olsen goes on to say it in another context, "an interpretation of a text is an interpretation of parts and passages, in the case of a literary work an interpretation of characters, setting, symbols, structure, action, rhetorical features, and so on" (1987: 42). In *The Executioner's Song*, a number of motifs converge into patterns that signal the meaninglessness of life; the 'snow' is one of these motifs that come to function as symbols. After the figure and theme of the snow is introduced early in the narrative, it seems

to generate new versions of whiteness that connote blankness and emptiness. For example, copy-machine paper is associated with the existential sense of a void, now felt by one Lucinda Smith: “She had always thought ‘existential’ was an odd word, but now it was so bleak and cold outside, just a little bit of eternal snow on the ground, and she felt as if no one had ever gone out of this motel with these Xerox machines, and the typewriters” (ES 879-80). In *The Armies of the Night* “Mailer” himself feels a deep detestation for “liberal academics,” whose world resembles “the scent of the void which comes off the pages of a Xerox copy” (AN 15). Like Mailer’s private figure of evil, plastic, a Xerox copy serves here as a symbol of the unnatural, empty, and deadly. Just as Brenda earlier feels Gary’s mysterious emptiness as reflected in the snow on the mountains, Lucinda now senses the meaninglessness of her efforts to do paper work in order to struggle with the Gilmore case: it seems that there is no point, no meaning, only trivial black figures on the white Xerox pages as there are banal black traits on the white, “eternal” snow.²¹ And just as there are only figures in the snow and marks on a Xerox paper, there are only words in texts written by journalists, words incapable of reaching their referent, words that ultimately signify the impossibility to “word the wordless.”

Gilmore’s Life and Death: Deconstruction and Construction of Meaning

The Executioner’s Song may seem to invite a deconstructionist reading, if only because void and nothingness are integral parts of its phenomenological vision of the whiteness of the world and seem to call for a nihilistic focusing on the emptiness of reality and the absence of meaning. Thus, Mailer’s narrative implies that language uses people more fully than people use language, and that our reality is “always already” textually constructed. However, we should be reflexive enough not to see the world of *Executioner* as purely textual and linguistic and as evoking only negative questions. The lives of the people depicted in the narrative certainly rest on shaky ground,

²¹ This kind of figuration of snow and whiteness comes close to the symbolic motivation and metatextuality in V. Shalamov’s Gulag memoirs as analyzed by Toker: “The scene is thus turned into allegory: the snow becomes a blank page”; “Life seems to be writing itself, imprinting traces on white sheets of snow, memory, paper” (2000: 5, 74). In Ted Hughes’s well-known metalyric poem “The Thought-Fox” a poet reflects upon “this blank page” while a fox moving in the forest “sets neat prints into the snow,” until finally “the page is printed” (Hughes 2002 [1957]: 3).

owing to crisis, breakdown, loss, and paranoia. But to perceive this is not tantamount to claiming that Mailer's book rests on similar grounds and only finds dead ends in its search for meaning. It would perhaps be more accurate to see *Executioner* not as a "deconstructionist" narrative (one which could be best approached through deconstructionist criticism and which would also itself present a deconstructionist "reading" of its world) but as a postmodernist text, perhaps the foremost example of postmodernist nonfiction in American literature.

The Meaningful Subject

Despite its prevailing sense of orality or "spokenness," Mailer's narrative seems haunted by a concern with writing, textuality, and language, where people's speech acts do not carry a clear communicative function and where the words are incapable of reaching the truth. This thematic strand is apparently highlighted by the (deconstructionist) notion that Mailer's authorial voice is only present through its absence. As Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan puts it, in deconstruction the very notion of a *narrator* becomes superfluous: "The text is performed by language, not by a specific person, voice, or even *instance*" (1996: 14). According to Allen Thiher, one of the interesting aspects of contemporary culture is that "many believe simultaneously that language articulates the world and that language cannot reach the world" (1984: 93; cf. Bertens 1987: 158). Obviously, many "postmodernist" readings of *The Executioner's Song* have emphasized the fact that the narrative presents *language* in some ways as the most immediate material condition of life. As we have seen, in *Executioner* the question of language and textuality is prominent on the level of the story itself; thus, "textuality figures superficiality" and characters and events "are just words, just black marks on a page" (Anderson 1987: 127-28). In fact, Gilmore himself is a creator of his own image through his extensive writing of letters, his constant act of making up stories, and through his conscious use of language; as he himself admits: "*I like language, but I tell the truth*" (ES 850; my emphasis). Gilmore assumes, it seems, that language-use and truth-telling are distinct practices, almost opposed to each other, a distinction which reflects the larger issue of the representation of reality in *The Executioner's Song*. From reporter Barry Farrell's viewpoint, Gilmore is "his own writer" (ES 793) and the maker of his own "Gilmore canon," which is created in "the same narrative style every hustler and psychopath would give you" (ES 798).²²

²² Anderson notes that "Gilmore's dependence on written texts is important," that "ultimately Gilmore becomes more interested in the aesthetics and interrelationships of

Different readings of Mailer's work agree in seeing Gary Gilmore as a predominantly "linguistic" character, a subject that only exists textually. As a self-reflexive text which turns into metadiscourse, *The Executioner's Song*, perhaps even more so than its predecessor in the Mailer canon, *Of a Fire on the Moon*, can be seen as representing "the impossibility of traditional representation" and remaining a "metalinguistic act," a language about language (see Bertens 1987: 141). What makes Gilmore a "distinctively Postmodernist character," on this basis, is that his person seems to consist of discourse; most radically, then, "character *is* language" (ibid.: 148). Anderson emphasizes the "textual" and "linguistic" level of Mailer's book: "In *The Executioner's Song* the subject is vacuum, and the language is dangerously, but appropriately vacuous itself. [...] In the broad ironies of the structure of this text, he [Mailer] vouchsafes himself against the meaninglessness he is imitating. He tropes meaninglessness, thus making it meaningful" (1987: 131). Anderson, for instance, presents Gilmore's character in terms of poststructuralist criticism which sees that the subject is socially constructed, a product of language and discourse rather than a psychological-biological center that uses language for its own purposes. As a linguistic and discursive construction and as a product of representation, this kind of subject is always susceptible to deconstruction. In the "anti-human" (Foucauldian and Lacanian) theories, the human subject is connected with the grammatical subject and reduced to a structural position in a system governed by differences, or, indeed, *subjected to* the symbolic order of language; this train of thought culminates in "the deconstructionist idea that we are spoken by language" (Rimmon-Kenan 1996: 13, 14).²³ However, as Silvio Gaggi argues, the view that the human subject is entirely a linguistic construction may have some dangerous implications; for example, it needs to be asked, "what ethical constraints on that construction could be possible?" (1997: xi). As he suggests, "in the poststructuralist world the larger force to which one is subject is not an individual or human agency but

language than in the truth the language purports to communicate," and that "in prison he becomes both writer and literary critic of his own writing" (1987: 127).

²³ More than in his other work Mailer seems here to be bending toward textual understanding of our world and our experience of it, even though we can hardly place him in the same camp as certain deconstructionists or anti-humanists. Obviously, Mailer's romantic belief in individual action and creation is opposed to the theories of "social energy." As Mark Edmundson argues, "Foucault is [then] very much unlike his contemporary Norman Mailer, someone who also takes a strong interest in marginal figures" (1995: 162). In his analysis of *The Executioner's Song* Edmundson emphasizes Mailer's "romantic aspirations" and "Emersonian illusions" about "originality and self-invention" and discusses Mailer's way of framing Gilmore inside this romantic vision (see 1990: 435).

language itself, which contains all of us in its prisonhouse, makes subjects of us all” (ibid.: xii). But would we say that Gilmore’s *prison* was *language* and that, ultimately, the murders he committed were discursive acts toward other linguistic “subjects,” or that his execution only meant a temporary end for the infinite play of signifiers?

It can be argued that some overtly textual theories, especially deconstruction, tend to adopt, in advance, a cynical and ready-made approach to literary works. According to Stein Haugom Olsen, deconstruction rejects the convention of artistic unity and finds, as if ineluctably, that texts “yield insoluble paradoxes and contradictions” (1987: 210). Similarly, for Lilian Furst, “deconstruction is strongly drawn to the paradoxes and contradictions, the gaps, blanks and indeterminacies in the text” (1992a: 18). There is, then, a rather strict either/or division in much deconstructionist theory between the “organic unity” or “total and totalizable significance” of a literary work and the ultimate “unreadability” of all literary texts, which only frustrate the interpreter’s attempt at some coherent meaning (see Doležel 2000: 638). My reading of Mailer’s work is not deconstructive: I aim to seek the meaning of its separate parts in relation to the over-all structure, without however claiming that the work should be seen as a totally unified whole.²⁴

Amidst emptiness and incomprehensibility there still stands Gilmore’s private existential vision, his serious decision to die. It even seems that *death* is the only thing that can any longer be meaningful, or in postmodernist terms, “only death can escape the play of rationalization and endless interpretation”; in our “postmodern, postexistentialist culture increasingly defined by media simulations [...] death is the only way to put a stop to the infinite play of signification” (Tabbi 1995: 192, 193). Gilmore’s conviction that he should be executed by the brutal method of the firing squad instead of the clinical procedure of a lethal injection, may also be read as a sign of his existential need to feel his *presence* at the very last moment. In Judith Scheffler’s words, “in an age of absurdity, the Hipster survives the constant threat of death by confronting it squarely” (1986 [1983]: 189). In this sense Mailer constructs Gilmore as a kind of hipster figure in the style of “The White Negro,” according to which the hipster, or the “philosophical psychopath” (AM 343), chooses “to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without

²⁴ In fact, a rhetorical approach to narrative, while not sharing the basic principles with deconstruction, may find the search for organic unity a less than rewarding critical pursuit, shifting the attention away from the formal concerns and focusing instead on the dynamics of the audience’s response to the narrative (see Phelan & Rabinowitz 1994: 5-6).

roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self" (AM 339). Furthermore, for the hipster there exists simultaneously "the desire to murder and the desire to create," and his vision is "a dialectical conception of existence with a lust for power, a dark, romantic, and yet undeniably dynamic view of existence" (AM 342-43). Thus Gilmore's stoic masculine position in the middle of the postmodern media world is one possibly meaningful answer to the sense of meaninglessness.

Rather than searching for some final answer, some solution to the mystery and complexity of Gary Gilmore's personality, Mailer's narrative implies that perhaps there is no answer, no ultimate meaning in a person's life and doings.²⁵ There is a cruel irony at the end of *Executioner*, where Gilmore is literally "opened" by autopsy, so that the surgeons do to his body what journalists could not metaphorically do to his mind. Gilmore's autopsy (and the detailed description of it) creates an unfamiliar effect, especially because the narrator still speaks of the dead body as "Gary" and points out emotionally significant details, such as his tattoos: "'Mom' had been written on his left shoulder, and 'Nicole' on his left forearm" (ES 1011). The question of the endless complexity of both reality and human life is implied: "If life is as simple as the taking apart and putting together of corpses, why is reality so elusive and challenging?" (Green 1987: 47). On the story level of *The Executioner's Song* there is a number of newspaper reporters, television journalists, police detectives, psychiatrists, lawyers, judges, writers and others trying to find a path to the "core" of Gilmore, to understand his personality and motives. Anderson suggests that the scene of the autopsy finally shows that there is *nothing*, thus foregrounding the theme of the narrative and the style of the text, that of emptiness and meaninglessness: "The center is wordless. The zero-degree quality of the language mirrors Mailer's inability on one level to find an explanation, an overarching order" (1987: 130). However, it can be argued that the meaning of the story of *The Executioner's Song* is not only its meaninglessness. The book suggests that there should be some meaning in life and death – and this is precisely what is Mailer's main theme in his entire work, deriving from his philosophy of "mystic existentialism."

²⁵ In a way, *The Executioner's Song* resembles *Citizen Kane*, a film which has profoundly influenced the modernist novel (as Morris Dickstein suggests, "Mailer [is] the Orson Welles of American literature" [2002: 162]). Welles's cinematic narrative also employs a romantic theme of lost childhood innocence, and it contains an embedded story of a reporter trying to solve the mystery of Charles Foster Kane. Through various interviews, texts and media representations we are offered many and often conflicting viewpoints on the main character whose real personality finally eludes us.

By contrast to overtly textual theories that construct non-communicative models of narrative, we may understand literary narratives as communicative acts in their own right and analyze conventions that guide the process of constructing meanings. If one opts against seeing Mailer's text as an example of an infinite play of signifiers and differences always deferring meaning, *The Executioner's Song* is read not only as "language" or "textuality." Nor is the life and death of Gary Gilmore seen only a sign; rather, "[t]o understand the language of a text is to recognize the world to which it refers" (Culler 1975: 135). Instead of deconstructing and demolishing all meaning and value, critical postmodernism does pose profound questions about the world and its systems, norms and significations. Some critics have argued that Mailer's theme in *The Executioner's Song* is the overall fictionality of narratives and histories and the subjectivity of all truth; others would argue that "it is harder to accept the notion that this is Mailer's *principal* theme, central to everything he does in this huge book" and conclude that we ought to consider Mailer's "social interests," which are not accommodated by the notion of "the fictionality of all narrative" (Merrill 1992: 175). In Chapter IV I tried to relate *Of a Fire on the Moon* to the poetics and problems of postmodernism, for Mailer's book emphasizes that a (post)modernist event like the first moon flight needs to be approached through speculative questions which problematize the truths of science, technology, religion, and art. What connects Mailer's nonfiction, from *The Armies of the Night* to *Oswald's Tale*, to postmodernism is its attempt to answer ultimate questions such as "what truth?" and "whose reality?"

As a work of postmodernist nonfiction, *The Executioner's Song* can be metaphorically linked to (post)modernist painting, such as Jackson Pollock's "action painting" in which "shapes and masses come into existence in front of the eyes of the 'painter' without his foreknowledge of their existence" (Zavarzadeh 1976: 180).²⁶ This is a narrative illusion that Mailer's text may give to the reader. According to Zavarzadeh's model, this kind of nonfiction works in a purely *phenomenological* mode, depicting "a stubborn phenomenal circle of existence which, when closely examined,

²⁶ For example, Andy Warhol's book *a* (1968) is a transcription of the tapes of about twenty-four hours in the lives of Warhol and some of his friends. In Zavarzadeh's thesis it is one of the most experimental of "nonfiction novels," representing a narrative version of "pointillism" as a technique of painting: "The bizarre, spastic, and eccentric life registered in *a* is a life broken into its prismatic components"; "The horror and boredom of contemporary experience is not talked about but iconographically captured so the reader himself is bored, frustrated, confused in the very process of reading" (1976: 186, 205). In an interview Mailer explicitly reflects on his "expressionist painting technique" in *The Executioner's Song*: "[A] painter like a writer sometimes gets to a point where he can no longer interpret what he sees. Then the act of painting what he literally sees becomes

proves baffling and mysterious” (ibid.: 181).²⁷ In *Executioner*, the “white” world appears endlessly mysterious and incomprehensible behind its clear, factual, and simple-looking surface structure. The phenomenological theory suggests that no two readers will experience the text (or the world) in an identical way; thus “two people gazing at the night sky may be both looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper” (Iser 1974 [1972]: 282). In one of the most poetic paragraphs of Mailer’s narrative, Brenda appears to connect Gary’s eyes – those very eyes which became famous in a rock song after his death and autopsy – to the whiteness of the snow and the clouds. Brenda is, obviously, unable to tell what those eyes see and what Gary’s intentionality toward the world may be:

In the mountains, the snow was iron gray and purple in the hollows, and glowed like gold on every slope that faced the sun. The clouds over the mountains were lifting with the light. Brenda took a good look into his eyes and felt full of sadness again. His eyes had the expression of rabbits she had flushed, scared-rabbit was the common expression, but she had looked into those eyes of scared rabbits and they were calm and tender and kind of curious. They did not know what would happen next. (ES 16)

It is as if through a larger self-reflexion, the *narrative* itself does not know what would happen next, for it seems to follow the flow of life, waiting for the shapes and masses of events and incidents to come into existence in front of the eyes of people (both the narrator and the characters) without any foreknowledge of their existence.

This is, then, the rather exceptional “nonfictional” technique of *The Executioner’s Song*, exceptional in the sense that obviously the (real) events already *are* part of the knowledge of the author, the reader, the narrator, and even those real-life people who were interviewed after the “fact.” But through its artistic use of gaps, blanks, anticipation and *paralipsis* in its construction of the “white” world, the narrative gives the illusion that “the

the aesthetic act. Because what he’s seeing is incredible. It may or may not be possessed of meaning. Reality, itself, closely studied is mysterious, and it’s elusive” (Lennon [ed.] 1988: 269).

²⁷ As Zavarzadeh also suggests: “The phenomenological question about reading the nonfiction novel concerns the change in the overall scheme of behavior and is an index of the depth of contemporary estrangement. [...] The metaphysical void and the consequent moral vacuum which permeate contemporary experience cannot be willed away by enforced, imagined solutions” (1976: 184). Zavarzadeh’s phenomenological reading of the experience of estrangement, void, and vacuum in contemporary life and of its reflections in the nonfiction novel actually *precedes* (and hence to some extent anticipates) *The Executioner’s Song*.

components of [the text's] experiential situation unfold before the 'author' as he listens to the 'narrators' depict their own fictual world" (Zavarzadeh 1976: 180). The phenomenological approach connects the reading of literary texts with our perception of reality. As Wolfgang Iser argues, "one text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for every individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way"; thus, "the potential text is infinitely richer than any of its individual realizations" (1974 [1972]: 280). On a rereading of Mailer's long narrative, we may see the conscious authorial and aesthetic organization behind the seemingly random material. Despite its nonfictionality, the work is not a direct model of the actual world: to a large extent it constructs a narrative world of its own. Therefore, among Mailer's nonfictions *The Executioner's Song* comes closest to being a *fictional novel*.²⁸

Gaps, Blanks, and Breaks in the Narrative

The Executioner's Song is filled with camouflaged metaphoric patterns, strands of motifs, and fragmented themes. Its technical organization is famous for short paragraphs separated from each other by "empty holes" or "white spaces," always breaking the flow of narration and moving the point of view from one character to another. As the real-life characters of Mailer's narrative seek to understand Gary Gilmore, there seems to be a parallel process of readerly construction. Since no clear solutions to the mystery of Gilmore are given, the reading process becomes progressively more reflexive as the reader attempts to fill in the gaps and construct coherent meanings. To some extent this may be true of all literature: according to Roman Ingarden's phenomenological theory of literature, "every literary work is in principle incomplete and always in need of further supplementation" (1973: 251). This means that the reading of a literary work is a creative process of "concretization," bridging the gaps in the structure and filling out

²⁸ I do not mean to simplify my thesis when suggesting that *The Executioner's Song* resembles a work of fiction; I still consider it Mailer's most complex work of nonfiction. Mailer himself wanted to call the book "a true life novel," and the very label 'the novel' apparently had its influence on the fact that whereas *The Armies of the Night* had won the Pulitzer Prize for *nonfiction* in 1968, *Executioner* won the same prize in the category of *fiction* in 1980 – "thus temporarily shelving the debate on the book's genre" (Dearborn 1999: 351). "Temporarily" might be the right word here; the discussion of the generic status of *The Executioner's Song* was resumed after 1980 in numerous essays (e.g., Radford 1983; Scheffler 1986 [1983]; Hellmann 1986; Anderson 1987; Wenke 1987; Schleifer 1989; Edmundson 1990; Lounsbury 1990; Merrill 1992; Frus 1994; Tabbi 1995; Hardwick 1999; Lehtimäki 2003).

the schematized aspects of the text (see Freund 1987: 140). As Menakhem Perry adds from the vantage point of poetics, “most of the information a reader derives from a text is not explicitly written in it; rather it is the reader himself who supplies it by the mere fact of choosing frames” (1979: 44-45). This view of reading comes quite close to the cognitive theories of literature discussed above: if a text is incomplete, and thus often ambiguous, readers need various devices of “narrativization” and “naturalization” in order to come to terms with it.

According to Anderson, Capote’s *In Cold Blood* represents the narration of “authorial silence” in which “the reading experience depends on ‘gaps’ and ‘blanks’” (1987: 49); the role and position of the author-narrator is not visible. This narrative technique is reminiscent of that of *The Executioner’s Song*. When speaking of gaps and blanks in Capote’s narrative, Anderson also suggests that in the book “the rhetoric of silence is the central strategy” and that it “acknowledges the limits of factual reporting” (ibid.: 56) and uses “style as argument.” Thus the theme and the subject matter of *In Cold Blood*, an event which is painful and hard to deal with, is reflected in the narrative style of the book, where not everything can be said. Anderson reads Capote’s gaps, blanks, and silences partly on the basis of Iser’s suggestion that withheld information and withdrawn interpretation leave the reader to draw inferences and connections. In Iser’s scheme, gaps are moments of indeterminacy, drawing the reader into the action (see Anderson 1987: 49; cf. Iser 1978 [1976]: 168). Iser’s early, phenomenologically influenced reader-response theory characterizes all reading as a process of filling in gaps, making readers aware of their own role as “cognitively creative, gap-filling beings” (Herman 2002: 67). On the other hand, as André Brink argues from a more poststructuralist stance, “language itself marks and masks and designates, but also constitutes, gaps, absences, silences” (1998: 220).²⁹ I see the white world of *The Executioner’s Song* as full of gaps, breaks, blanks, and silences, with whiteness itself functioning as a figure of emptiness.

²⁹ Brink’s example is Robbe-Grillet’s *Le Voyeur*, a novel about a crime that cannot be fully represented in narrative language: “It is a feature of the reported language in *Le Voyeur* that at some of the most crucial moments of the narrative sentences should drop away into silence, leaving only phrases or words behind, practically inviting misunderstanding” (1998: 211). Mieke Bal sees Robbe-Grillet’s novel as an example of such textual-visual poetics “where a blank page hides [...] a crime” (2000: 490). Interestingly, Brian Wicker contrasts Robbe-Grillet with Mailer in the sense that while the former wants to “get rid of all metaphors, to cleanse his linguistic palate of the taste of what he [Robbe-Grillet] calls this ‘never innocent figure of speech,’” the latter (especially in books like *Of a Fire on the Moon*) celebrates the richness of figural language, making a “plea for an older poetic and metaphorical way of looking at and describing the world” (see 1975: 2). In a way, then, the style of *The Executioner’s Song*, written after Wicker’s analysis, not only signifies Mailer’s “return” to the style of Hemingway, but shows some closeness to the modernist style of Robbe-Grillet as well.

As Anderson suggests in his reading of *In Cold Blood*, the rhetorical effect of the silences is twofold, since, first, they make us “assemble” the text ourselves, generate meaning from the “instructions” implicit in the narrative, and second, silence requires reading and interpretation, the solving of the “puzzles” (see 1987: 51-52). According to Leona Toker’s rhetorical analysis, in poetry silence can speak through pauses, tropes, and obscure images, whereas in the novel “it speaks through manipulative informational gaps” (1993: 1). These rhetorical effects of silence, ambiguity, and “gapping,” always calling for readerly participation, are far more powerfully used in Mailer’s *Executioner* than in Capote’s book. We may note that the gaps and blanks visibly “exist” in the graphic form of Mailer’s narrative, in a way mirroring the larger theme of the book and monitoring the reader’s cognitive approach to the text (and the world). From the point of view of descriptive poetics, the gaps in literary texts create suspense, shape the plot and determine strategic ambiguities, whereas Iser’s reader-response theory focuses not on deliberate narrative strategies but on more “passive” textual indeterminacies waiting for the reader’s action. In Meir Sternberg’s model, the literary text may be conceived of as a system of gaps which produces literary dynamics. Sternberg makes the distinction between *permanent* gaps and *temporary* gaps in the narrative text, thus proposing a more semantic and pragmatic version than Iser’s phenomenological theory (see Sternberg 1985: 236; cf. Kermode 1990: 35).³⁰ The withholding of information through the creation of gaps may signify both narrative selection (for not everything can be told) and narrative suspense (through temporal ordering, anticipation, or *paralipsis* as the narrator tells us less than he or she obviously knows); thus “the storyteller’s withholding of information opens gaps, gaps produce discontinuity, and discontinuity breeds ambiguity” (Sternberg 1985: 236; cf. Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 128-30; Toker 1993: 6, 15). The withholding of information, the use of temporary gaps, is a typical feature of detective stories (e.g., Mailer’s *Tough Guys Don’t Dance*, where the narrator’s memory is full of gaps). Obviously, *The Executioner’s Song* can be read as a “suspense” story concerning murder, trial, and execution, but as I would argue, its “system of gapping” as a *nonfictional* narrative raises some intriguing narratological questions.

³⁰ Whereas permanent gaps “give rise to questions or sets of questions to which no single, fully explicit and authoritative answer is provided by the text,” temporary gaps are those that “the work opens at some point upon the continuum of the text only to fill it in explicitly and satisfactorily itself – or at least to enable the reader to do so with ease – at a subsequent stage” (Sternberg 1978: 50-51).

We may note, for example, that Gary Gilmore's motives in *The Executioner's Song* remain very much a permanent gap (more or less like Raskolnikov's motives in *Crime and Punishment*); this is a kind of gap that the reader cannot disregard, even though no definitive answers will be given. The permanent gap gives a basis for a potentially endless set of hypotheses – this kind of gap *par excellence*, taken from the real world, is exemplified by the actual “force” behind the assassination of President Kennedy, a gap that is also visible, so to speak, in Mailer's subsequent *Oswald's Tale*. Sternberg primarily discusses *fictional* works, but we may take a look at his observations on supposedly nonfictional (Biblical) narratives. He states that “since the whole of anything can never be told, the truth is always the contextually relevant truth – including the filled gaps but exclusive of the innumerable blanks” (1985: 236). As his analytical example from the Bible suggests, “the tale's own phrase applies to the reader's question as well: there is no answer,” and hence “the cause and time of death remain a permanent gap, the information having been elided to open an ambiguity for the reader to puzzle over throughout” (*ibid.*: 239). Let us contemplate the curiously short, cold, and detached scene in *Executioner* in which Gary Gilmore commits his first murder, shooting the gas station serviceman Max Jensen. Here the clean, well-managed interior of the service station reflects the controlled clarity and sparsity of language itself, just as the use of the automatic pistol is connected to Gilmore's unemotional behavior:

It was a bathroom with green tiles that come to the height of your chest, and tan-painted walls. The floor, six feet by eight feet, was laid in dull grey tiles. A rack of paper towels on the wall had Towl Saver printed on it. The toilet had a split seat. An overhead light was in the wall.

Gilmore brought the Automatic to Jensen's head. “This one is for me,” he said, and fired.

“This one is for Nicole,” he said and fired again. The body reacted each time.

He stood up. There was a lot of blood. It spread across the floor at a surprising rate. Some of it got onto the bottom of his pants.

He walked out of the rest room with the bills in his pocket, and the coin changer in his hand, walked by the big Coke machine and the phone on the wall, walked out of this real clean gas station. (ES 224)

Here, the epistemological gaps are presented in a graphic form, reflecting the narrative technique that runs throughout the book. The use of gaps here indicates the lack of evidence, documents, and hard facts, for obviously there was no eye-witness present – about the second murder it is stated in court that “there is no one that actually saw the incident” (ES 432). The technique also functions on a more “ontological” level, being connected to the narrative's overall sense of the void and the unknowable and its vision of

the world which is “broken” and filled with white blanks. Mailer’s narrative is also fragmented into various points of view, and there are gaps between the discourses. As Frus notes, “a ‘visible’ reminder of this is the white space between paragraphs or short groups of paragraphs on nearly every page of the novel.” After suggesting that “these blank lines also remind us that the narrative is necessarily incomplete,” Frus draws the problematic conclusion that this very incompleteness signifies the ultimate *untruthfulness* of the narrative, since “the narrator will not assume, and will not ask us as reading subjects to assume, that we have the ‘whole story’ with the all blanks filled in” (1994: 185-86). To my mind, only *fiction* can give the “whole story,” since it creates its own coherent world, so that the textual world and the reference world are indistinguishable from each other (cf. Ryan 2001: 105). As possible-world theorists would argue, the “incompleteness” of a non-fictional narrative is rather a sign of its *truth-claiming function*, since any serious nonfiction must reflect upon the problem of having the whole story with all blanks filled in.³¹

In this first murder scene of *The Executioner’s Song*, the *ethics* and *aesthetics* of nonfictional narration come together, serving the referential and poetic function simultaneously. While there is no more evidence of the first murder committed by Gilmore, on a closer reading the section betrays quite a detailed description of objects and actions: “[the blood] spread across the floor *at a surprising rate*” and “*this real clean gas station*”; these are reflections which could only come from Gilmore’s point of view. The Hemingway-like suggestiveness and effectiveness of the murder section is further enhanced by the asyndetic structure of the last paragraph, where the repetition of “walked” indicates Gary’s rapid exit from the gas station.³² Mailer’s technique here is a postmodernist, self-reflexive version of Hemingway’s iceberg technique, where the most crucial (and painful) things are hidden between the lines, as though unable to come to the surface. As has been maintained, Mailer’s “nominalistic” language, for example in

³¹ According to Toker, “Gulag memoirs are never felt to be self-sufficient, finished works,” since “some gaps are never filled in” (2000: 90). As Mailer reflects in *Oswald’s Tale*, when dealing with the Oswald/Kennedy case, “there is an *uneasy gap* in scattered details” (OT 385; my emphasis).

³² Compare the famous ending of *A Farewell to Arms*: “After a while I went out *and* left the hospital *and* walked back to the hotel in the rain” (Hemingway 1929: 332; my emphases). As Phelan puts it, “[t]he paratactic structure and the pace of sentence reflect Frederic Henry’s slow, deliberate, measured departure” (1998: 99; cf. 1996: 74). Ironically, like Frederic after Catherine’s death in Hemingway’s novel, Gilmore also leaves the place in order to begin “a new life,” coming, however, a step closer to his own death. Hemingway’s novel is one of the subtexts for Mailer’s *Executioner*, especially as regards its figures of whiteness, emptiness, death, despair, and failure, as well as the stark poetic style, which, of course, exerted a strong influence on modern American prose.

this first murder scene, reflects a state of affairs where there is no exact information and knowledge of the actual happenings (see Bertens 1987: 154). These white spaces become a world of their own, enigmas needing the narrativization, interpretation, and filling in, a task given to the reader of the book.³³

Mailer envisions modern America as a dull, brutal, and both spiritually and imaginatively empty space, whose state of mind is reflected in the use of language. As Lounsberry suggests, the largest “linguistic system” in *Executioner* is “the inability to know,” and thus the huge narrative is “filled with people who cannot comprehend the world” (1990: 187). Mailer’s book is largely about experiences which cannot be turned into a clear and conscious vision, as in Nicole’s absence of feeling after she hears about the murders Gary has committed: “She didn’t know how she felt, and she didn’t know if she cared how she felt. [...] It was close to a spooky experience. Nicole didn’t know what she was feeling” (ES 298). The most striking example of an inability to express one’s feelings or to give meaning to one’s deeds is, obviously, Gilmore’s “chillingly detached language” (Wenke 1987: 205) in his “explanation” why he chose, in Lieutenant Nielsen’s words, “that service station in the middle of nowhere”: “I don’t know,” said Gilmore. “It was there” (ES 288). In the murder section cited above, Gilmore’s “reasoning” as he shoots Jensen (“This one is for me”; “This one is for Nicole”) is based upon a void, for his brutal action is more a sign of existential emptiness than an implementation of a private philosophy as in the case of Raskolnikov. In Gilmore’s act, there is a feeling of an existential void in the style of Meursault, the random, near-unmotivated murderer in Camus’ *L’Etranger*. Bertens juxtaposes Camus’ typically modernist characterization of a murderer with Mailer’s “postmodernist” characterization of Gilmore in *The Executioner’s Song* (1987: 142, 148). In Mailer’s narrative, people’s difficulty in communicating with each other and comprehending the world transforms the familiar, everyday life into a frightening white space. This is foregrounded by the two murders that have no visible motive, only some tentative Dostoevskyan philosophy which fails to come to light.

The gaps and blanks in the characters’ experience may even reflect the narrative style and its graphic visualization; thus, language “hints at the rhetorical function of [Mailer’s] textual breaks” (Lounsberry 1990: 188). For example, Debbie Bushnell, the wife of a hotel manager Ben Bushnell,

³³ As Lounsberry suggests, “such conflicting views only serve to increase the mystery that is Gary Gilmore, the mystery abetted by the short paragraphs and blank white space” (1990: 186). In Edmundson’s words, each paragraph in the book is a “self-contained dramatic unit” surrounded with “a generous aura of blank space” (1990: 440).

the second man murdered by Gilmore, feels that the violent death of her husband produces an absence, an emptiness, and a break:

Debbie was in the rocking chair all night and Benjamin was in her arms. She kept trying to get the new thing together, but there had been too many breaks. Seeing the strange man in the motel office was a break in her understanding. Then the instant when she saw Ben's head bleeding. *That was an awfully large break.* Ben dead. She never went back to the motel. (ES 272; my emphasis)

The most powerful aspect of the narrative is the incomprehensibility of death, the difficulty of understanding and dealing with it, and even the narrator's inability to adequately represent it.³⁴ As Dorrit Cohn suggests, although from a different viewpoint, no instant of "life" highlights the difference between nonfiction (like biography) and fiction more dramatically than death and dying, for "here fiction is able to represent an experience [a dying consciousness] that cannot be conveyed by 'natural' discourse in *any* manner or form" (1999: 22). Debbie's painful feeling that there "was an awfully large break" is one of the metaphors and self-reflections of the text as a whole. In it, breaks are visible as white blanks, gaps and spaces between the paragraphs, indicating both the shift of the viewpoint, the fragmentary nature of the text, and the actual epistemological gaps in the documentation, sometimes resulting in a more ontological sense of the impossibility of knowing the world. There is something "suppressed," "restricted" or "disnarrated" in Mailer's narrative, especially in its confrontation with death. Finally, the actual execution of Gary Gilmore is described through the eye-witness account of Lawrence Schiller, but with a telling silence; the grimness of the place ("the seat of execution was no more than a little old office chair" [ES 980]) is reflected in the laconic, harsh style of Schiller's report, just as the murders Gilmore committed were represented in a blank narrative voice.

Obviously, Mailer's choice of technique is not only an aesthetic solution, but is epistemological as well, for it indicates the real inability and failure

³⁴ The fact that human pain is not only a linguistic expression and that people live outside the narrative text as well, is reflected upon by Mailer in the acknowledgement section of his Afterword to *The Executioner's Song*: "Finally, a most special word of appreciation must be offered to Colleen Jensen and Debbie Bushnell for consenting to give a portrait of their husbands, and thereby obliging themselves to relive the most shattering and excruciating hours of their existence. No interviews were more painful for subject and interviewers both, and none were more valuable to the balance of this book" (ES 1055). This may also work as an example of how nonfictional narratives provide "routes" that go beyond and outside the narrative text to a commonly shared and experienced reality. In other words, "there is a materiality to the body and to death that is not entirely discursive" (Lehman 1997: 131).

to know, to get all the information and documents. Lubomír Doležel thus makes the distinction between *ontological* and *epistemological* gaps: the former belong to the artistic organization of a literary work, the latter signify the lack of historical evidence. He argues on the basis of possible-worlds semantics that both fictional and historical worlds are by necessity incomplete, and in this sense gaps are a universal feature of their macrostructure. However, there is a fundamental difference between fictional and historical gaps, since the writer of fiction is free to use the gaps according to aesthetic and stylistic factors, whereas the gaps in historical narrative result not only from the historian's conscious selection but also from lack of evidence, that is, from blanks that can be filled if new documents become available. Doležel defines this fundamental difference between fictional and historical gaps as follows: "Since fictional gaps are created in the act of world-making, they are ontological in nature. [...] The gaps in historical worlds are epistemological, given by the limitations of human knowledge" (1999: 258; cf. Doležel 1998b: 795-96; Herman 2002: 67-68).³⁵ As Iser argues, gaps and blanks function differently in fiction and nonfiction, because nonfictional, or "expository" texts, aim at explicitness and precision, trying to narrow down the "multiplicity of possible meanings" (1978 [1976]: 184). Anderson reads Iser as saying that "the reader [of nonfiction] should not have to fill any gaps or participate in the work of meaning" (1987: 52). In the same context, however, Anderson shows skillfully how Capote's *In Cold Blood* depends on the rhetoric of silence, the aesthetic use of gaps and blanks, in much the same way as his fiction. Obviously, here we should make a distinction between informative or "expository" nonfiction and *literary* nonfiction. As powerfully as any fiction, *The Executioner's Song* raises both ontological and epistemological questions in its aesthetics and ethics: Mailer's narrative seems to suggest, through its form and content, that our world is broken and incomplete. Here we may have a kind of embedded reflection of my larger thesis concerning the permanently *thematic* nature of Mailer's literary nonfiction and its combination of the *aesthetic* and the *factual*.

³⁵ Of course, as Doležel notes, it is the practice of *totalitarian* history to create the gaps in the actual world by erasing documented facts, which makes this practice a kind of conscious (but not artistic) fiction-making in its projection of the gaps into the actual world. Actual people can be eliminated from "official" historiography, but this kind of historical narrative does not serve as a model of the actual world but rather creates its own possible world. As Doležel also puts it, "history can be gapped, but it necessarily leaves traces" (1999: 261).

The Ethics of the Media Execution

Even though the first, more “novelistic” part of *The Executioner’s Song* has received more critical acclaim than the second, more “documentary” part, it appears that Book Two, “Eastern Voices,” is, at least for a theorist, even more interesting than Book One. The first part of the book, “Western Voices,” appears to be more ‘novelistic’ in its extended use of shifting focalization and thematic motivation. In the “Eastern Voices” section, Mailer tries to show how this book was made without putting himself in the picture as an embedded writer figure. In its second part *Executioner* is consequently transformed into a book about the writing of a book, so that the events and characters presented in the more novelistic first part become, in a way, deconstructed. It is as if the real flesh-and-blood people of the West now emerge as representations in newspaper and television – and become textualized figures in the book which we are reading. As Wenke argues, “Mailer’s treatment of the media’s highly questionable involvement in the story of Gary Gilmore broadens and deepens the theme of estrangement that dominates Book One” (1987: 209). It appears, as Wenke suggests, that the lives of the people of the West are already broken, just like their marriages, and they live without any clear sense of direction, feeling a loss of faith in any idea or value beyond the self. However, the “eastern” media that surrounds their empty, alienated world in Provo, Utah, succeeds only in making their lives even more broken and fragmented. This sometimes harsh daily life only offers “wonderful details for TV” (ES 610). The ethically problematic misrepresentations practiced by the media turn Brenda, probably the most sympathetic character of the narrative, into a sensationalistic figure. Even from the vantage point of Lawrence Schiller, the main character among the journalists, Brenda “was out front, wisecracking and *offered a real image for a TV show*. Almost good looking enough to be a Charlie’s Angel-type girl” (ES 714; my emphasis). However, in an example of Mailer’s (free indirect) narrative style in this book, Brenda’s own viewpoint emerges in the middle of the media representation: “Later *People* printed her picture. She was one of ‘Eight Tortured Women in Gary’s Life.’ *A real tacky and trashy article*. Brenda was described as a barmaid” (ES 751; my emphasis). Even more strongly the media’s real and symbolic “press” is felt through Gary’s other female cousin: “Toni knew why they called them the press. They almost squeezed her to death” (ES 903).

In its metajournalism, *The Executioner’s Song* represents such literary nonfiction which, because of its epistemological concerns, provides an

antithesis to sensational or “yellow” journalism (see Hartsock 2000: 145). Gilmore himself emerges as a critic of sensationalistic “trash” when speaking of “*yellow journalistic papers like the Enquirer*” (ES 807) and when commenting in his intellectual way that “*everybody knows that the National Enquirer is not exactly what you would call an ‘unimpeachable source’*” (ES 808). To some newspapers, he is a “slayer” and looks like “the demon that got into Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*” (ES 613). While newspapers are yelling how “*Carnival Atmosphere Surrounds Gilmore*” (ES 671), this is already anticipated in Gary’s laconic letter to Nicole: “*Its all become like a circus*” (ES 556). In fact, Gilmore’s practice of writing letters in prison is a sign of his serious aim of self-creation, but this attempt is constantly juxtaposed in the narrative with the media’s drive to destroy his image as a human being with his own will and dignity. What is crucial here, of course, is the fact that Gilmore is commenting on those “*very distasteful*” (ES 807) newspaper accounts that try to represent his character and misrepresent his serious will to die. More radical still is the role of television in the construction of Gilmore’s persona, especially on the eve of the execution:

On Saturday night, she [Lucinda Smith] did take a break and turned on the TV. There was ‘Saturday Night Live.’ They had a parody of Gary Gilmore. [...] They were getting him ready to be shot for the camera. Very sarcastic. Kept putting on the makeup. She never thought television would be this weird. (ES 879)

The “weirdness” of television is not restricted to parodies with a comedian impersonating Gary Gilmore. Reflecting the surrounding media atmosphere Schiller is forced to ask Gary: “IF YOU HAD A CHOICE, WOULD YOUR EXECUTION BE ON TELEVISION?” to which Gary answers, “*Would you like your death televised?*” (ES 691-92). The people waiting for the execution are also expecting, more or less approvingly, a “TV theatre” (ES 677), “a soap opera” (ES 678), “a Barnum and Bailey circus atmosphere,” and a “super bowl of violence” (ES 875). Finally, in the chapter following Gilmore’s execution, ironically entitled “Television,” Brenda – the character with whose focus the whole narrative begins, we may recall – gets the information directly from TV: “In just a few more seconds it flashed across the screen: GARY GILMORE IS DEAD!” (ES 999).

The painfulness of these problems is intensified by the reader’s sense that this is not fiction but real life. In Wendy Lesser’s documentary book *Pictures at an Execution* (1993) the subject matter is an attempted live TV broadcast of an actual execution: though there is a script and actors among “real” people, the fact remains that the “protagonist” does not simply act but actually dies. In this context Daniel Lehman presents his polemic for-

mula: “When characters die in fiction, characters die; when characters die in nonfiction, people die” (1997: 14). At issue here is the pragmatic question concerning nonfiction’s referentiality (which also implies fiction’s nonreferentiality). The deeply ethical question of fictionalizing and narrativizing a real-life event is a constant metajournalistic theme in American nonfiction; especially since some of the classics of the mode (Capote, Mailer) also represent the more common genre of a “true-crime novel.”³⁶ One early example of this phenomenon is provided by the sixteenth-century ballad, which, in its printed form, was “basically journalistic,” as “the main function of ballads was to act as newspapers” (Davis 1996 [1983]: 46). The subject matter reported in the ballads was human interest stories familiar from our modern-day perspective: different kinds of public affairs and events, catastrophes, crimes, murders, executions – stuff which has remained in the center of popular interest in the age of mass media.³⁷ In her thesis about reflexive reading, Frus focuses on the true-crime novel as an exemplary case of this practice. In addition, she suggests that “it is particularly *difficult* to read nonfiction narratives of crime or catastrophe reflexively,” since “we want the comforts of the genre as an assurance that we are not capable of such acts, but we want to fathom what causes this pathology in other people” (1994: 195). Lehman argues that in this field of facts, fictions, and representations the ethics of nonfiction comes to play an important role (see 1997: 14-15). It is a question of people’s lives and especially their deaths, and thus one of the crucial examples of narrative representation is how (dead) bodies are represented, documented, and fictionalized.

³⁶ There are various other examples as well, representing more or less ambitious literary nonfiction when grappling with the painful questions of murder and/or execution, and the media’s involvement in them, including such appropriately titled works as Janet Malcolm’s *The Journalist and the Murderer* (1990). Especially interesting in this regard is Lawrence Schiller’s documentary book on the O.J. Simpson case, *American Tragedy* (1996). Schiller’s other book *Perfect Town, Perfect Murder* (1998) employs his somewhat sensationalistic or voyeuristic practice, ironically reflected upon in some parts of *The Executioner’s Song*.

³⁷ In a sense the assassination of President Kennedy signifies a new beginning in the age of the mass media. In *Oswald’s Tale* Mailer registers how the complex realities of the Oswald/Kennedy case are rapidly, already in 1963, transformed into media narratives: “Like an octopus, the media seized the event with its limbs and suffocated movement with its body. The media had become a new force in human existence; it was on the way to taking over everything” (OT 697). Actually, it was *Oswald’s* killing by Jack Ruby, and the televisual immediacy of the act, which gave birth to postmodern loop television journalism, as Oswald’s death was witnessed first on a “live” program and then again and again by millions of TV viewers (see Cowart 2002: 98, 101). As Mailer puts it in *Oswald’s Tale*, “never before in history was a death witnessed by so many people giving full attention to their television sets” (OT 734).

Book Two of *The Executioner's Song* concerns itself with both representing and "selling" the story of Gary Gilmore, including the story of Nicole Baker.³⁸ A man called Dennis Boaz is the first journalist who tries, as one newspaper puts it, "to 'make some money' from Gilmore's story" (ES 550). When he is denied the rights to do the "factual" account, Boaz begins to think "that he might have to call his character Harry Kilmore, not Gary Gilmore" and that this "might make a good novel" (ES 645). The media's interest in the story explodes after a tragic event, as experienced by reporter Tamera Smith: "Her editor came up, and said, 'Nicole and Gilmore tried to commit suicide. They are in Intensive Care. Start writing a little story.' Tamera said, 'Wow.' Sat down at her typewriter, not even knowing what she was supposed to do" (ES 585). The journalistic work done on the story level functions constantly as a kind of *mise en abyme* structure which reveals something of the idea of the narrative text itself: "Schiller got an advance copy of Barry Farrell's article in *New West*. It was called 'Merchandising Gary Gilmore's Dance of Death' which sounded bad" (ES 718). Farrell's remarks and perceptions sometimes clearly reflect the apparent authorial position of the book (that is, Mailer's ideology), and he is the only journalist on the scene to have some Joan Didion-like "literary class" (ES 629). Still, the main character in this self-reflexive structure is Schiller, whose "faults" and "final integrity in confronting them are deeply embedded in Mailer's text" (Merrill 1992: 170). As some critics have noticed, Schiller's role in *Executioner* clearly resembles Mailer's own role as a character in his earlier nonfiction. Like Norman Mailer in *The Armies of the Night*, Lawrence Schiller in *The Executioner's Song* is at the beginning of his own story somewhat tired, frustrated, and even cynical, feeling it hard to tell if he has succeeded or failed in his life and work. As the story goes on, however, both of them find some new meaning in their work and probably in their life, fulfilling not only their artistic idea but also their moral sense.

As a kind of a reduced metonymy of Mailer, Schiller is, implicitly, the spokesman for the questions of ethics and poetics raised in *The Executioner's Song*. He contemplates those "media monkeys" (ES 595) who surround Utah State Prison, criticizing the style of "a classic newspaper reporter" who was "not looking for insight about Gary's inner life," just putting "a few paragraphs that the headline writer in the newsroom could clap intriguing words on" (ES 670). On the story-level *Executioner* is a narrative of other people's

³⁸ After Gary's execution, Lucinda Smith sees that Nicole "was carrying her little *Newsweek* magazine that had Gary on the cover" (ES 1037), and Schiller notes that "naturally, Larry Flynt's new skin mag, *Chic*, called at just this time to offer \$ 50,000

attempt at understanding and representing Gilmore, but on the textual, thematic, and ideological level it is the question of Mailer's own poetics and of the ethics of the reader's response. In this way, "like the book itself, our response [to Gilmore] is a complicated one," and getting at the meaning of our own response "is an effort that Mailer makes a part of his very subject" (Merrill 1992: 174). Through various reflections and embedded commentaries, a larger question in *Executioner* also emerges concerning how the Gilmore case should be represented. Of course, Mailer's "metajournalism" in this book is a very complex matter, and implies ethical problems of its own, especially if we take into account all the framing paratexts that play their roles in the final production of Gilmore's story. As Wenke argues:

The focus of the moral ambiguities attending the media's coverage of Gilmore's execution is Lawrence Schiller, the man who finally did secure the rights to Gilmore's story, contracted with Mailer to write the book, and eventually produced the movie for which Mailer wrote the screenplay (all of which points up the fact that, although it was written after Gilmore was dead and the uproar had subsided, *The Executioner's Song* is nevertheless implicated in the moral questions that arise when the grief of private tragedies is exposed to public scrutiny). (1987: 210)

Schiller, indirectly (and sometimes rather ambivalently) reflecting Mailer's authorial position, still aims at producing serious journalism instead of sensationalistic trash, and agonizes over the morality of his involvement in the story. In particular, he makes an ethical issue out of representation, promising Gary that he will try to present his story as truthfully as possible, and tries to convey this through a laconic telegram: "ON BEHALF OF ABC MOVIES, THE NEW INGOT COMPANY, AND MY ASSOCIATES WE WISH TO PURCHASE THE MOTION PICTURE AND PUBLICATION RIGHTS TO YOUR *TRUE LIFE STORY* [...] WE WISH TO PRESENT YOUR STORY *AS TRUTH NOT AS FICTION STOP*" (ES 587-88; my emphases). As John Hellmann suggests, Book Two of *Executioner* proceeds simultaneously on two levels; as the more explicit story line depicts Gilmore's trial and execution, the metatextual level concerns itself with the construction of the narrative itself. In this way, "the text develops simultaneously on two planes of interest in a mirror-like relation" (1981: 58). Schiller's attempts to find both the ethical solution and narrative form finally reflect the ethics and aesthetics of the actual text produced by Mailer. Therefore the fact that the documentary material gathered by

for a series of nudes on Nicole" (ES 1033). In the sense that Nicole symbolizes hope in the narrative, this media sensationalism strikes the reader (as it strikes Gary) as "very distasteful" indeed.

Schiller is finally brought to the hands of Mailer is already implied in the embedded story of the writing of the book.³⁹

According to Jean Radford, “certain passages [in *Executioner*] ironically allude to these processes and problems of writing,” and “[t]he intricacies of narrative form [...] are playfully put before the reader here” (1983: 235). Schiller had previously worked with Mailer on the production of *Marilyn* and is therefore known to other journalists as “an entrepreneur who put together a project that became *a book about Marilyn Monroe*” (ES 629; my emphasis). Now, as an embedded writer in *The Executioner’s Song*, he needs to contemplate who will be “*the future writer of the book*” (ES 709; my emphasis). Schiller’s self-reflections eventually grow into the *narrative’s* self-reflections: “I AM HERE TO RECORD HISTORY, NOT TO GET INVOLVED IN IT.” [...] ‘Actually,’ said Schiller to himself, ‘I have become part of it. All around me, I’m becoming part of the story’” (ES 714). As the media event surrounding Gilmore rapidly becomes carnivalesque, Schiller is at pains to reflect that “[h]e had been saying to himself for weeks that he was not part of the circus, that he had instincts which raised him above, a desire to record history, true history, not journalistic crap” (ES 857). Or, as he says to himself, “for the first time, Schiller, you can’t fictionalize, you can’t make it up, you can’t *embroider*” (ES 859). This vision is backgrounded by Gilmore’s message to him: “*I believe you are a man of some sensibility and interested in truth*” (ES 808). Finally, however, Schiller has to admit, quite painfully at the end of his own story, that he is “a writer without hands” (ES 1043), incapable of finding the narrative form and the ethical solution himself. And still, the work Schiller is doing on the embedded level – his careful gathering of the materials which give the basis for the actual production of the book – mirrors the work, *The Executioner’s*

³⁹ Stephen Greenblatt, the foremost practitioner of cultural poetics (or New Historicism), argues that the life and death of Gary Gilmore became consumer goods in the “capitalist circulatory system” of contemporary America. Greenblatt also reflects on the huge amount of material that was transformed by Mailer into an aesthetic and still unavoidably commercial work: “[M]aterial – here official documents, private papers, newspaper clippings, and so forth – is transferred from one discursive sphere to another and becomes aesthetic property” (1987: 270). There is even more to this story of circulation: Mailer wrote a screenplay to the 1982 television adaptation of *The Executioner’s Song*, which was directed by none other than Schiller, and this possibility of making a movie is already embedded in the narrative: “[S]chiller decided he might be in a good position. At least he wouldn’t have to deal with a TV show that would milk the real merits of the story. He still had the rights, and *he could do the book and the movie*” (ES 817; my emphasis). The film is even discussed with Gilmore himself in Mailer’s book, and Gary suggests that Warren Oates might play his part (see ES 658-59). In the actual television movie Gary’s role was played by Tommy Lee Jones and Nicole’s role by Rosanna Arquette.

Song, as a whole: “[E]ach piece, no matter how small, still belonged to one potentially beautiful structure now being put together” (ES 826).

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, the narrative of *The Executioner’s Song* is framed by two women figures, Gary’s cousin Brenda in the first scene and his mother Bessie in the last. At the end it is revealed that the book was actually made possible because of a young woman who emerges as the finest character on its pages, Gary’s troubled girlfriend Nicole.⁴⁰ Rather romantically, but still persuasively, Mailer’s narrative suggests that true strength and sense of life is felt and represented by women, and while Gary continues his life in the texts written mainly by men, he also continues his life in the mind and hearts of women. While Schiller has gathered the documentary material for this narrative, Nicole gives it its “life,” its sense and meaning. In the final pages of the narrative, Nicole is given the role of an embedded narrator: “She seemed to have a commitment to the interviews as deep as the beating of her heart. It was as if she had to tell him [Schiller] the story as once she had told it to Gary, and tell it all” (ES 1039). In his Afterword, Mailer emphasizes “the narrative wealth” that was provided by Nicole’s interviews: “Let it be said then that without the cooperation of Nicole Baker, there would not have been a way to do this factual account – this, dare I say it, *true life story*, with its real names and real lives – as if it were a novel” (ES 1053).⁴¹

In conclusion, we may note that as a description of the real people of Utah and its surroundings, Mailer’s narrative was a personal experience for the eminent rhetorical critic Wayne Booth. As Booth remarks, the reality outside the text and his own real-life experiences have a negative influence on his relationship with *The Executioner’s Song* and produce, for their part, his “mistrust” of the author implied in this work: “I am from the area of Utah in which his ‘novel’ is set; I know how misleading some of his portraits of the area and the people will be to readers who live elsewhere. And I fear the harm that his book will do to many of those who are caricatured in it, including Gilmore’s wife, children, and relatives” (1988: 210n). However, Booth’s critique of Mailer and the book, theoretically important as it would be, is not totally reliable. In addition to making a rather insignificant factual

⁴⁰ At the end of his review of Mailer’s anthology *The Time of Our Time*, Louis Menand writes intriguingly: “Gilmore is about death, and Nicole is, in the end, for life. There is no one quite like her in contemporary American literature, and she is possibly Norman Mailer’s greatest creation” (1998: 30).

⁴¹ After Gary’s execution Mailer met Nicole, and after the meeting decided to write the book (see Mills 1982: 426; Manso 1985: 580; Rollyson 1991: 283; Dearborn 1999: 344). Another glimpse of Nicole after the execution is given in Mikal Gilmore’s book *Shot in the Heart*: “She went back to her life, and I went back to mine” (1994: 372).

error (Gilmore was never actually married and had no children of his own), Booth fails to take into account those scrupulously documented materials, such as interviews, which give the basis to the narrative, its people and voices. We may even argue that Booth has certain problems in reading these “voices” in Mailer’s text, especially as they are rendered through the ambiguity of free indirect discourse. Perhaps, then, people make “caricatures” out of themselves and, as it seems to me, produce a more complicated and harsher picture of living in Utah than is acceptable to a liberal humanist like Booth. In any case, Lehman emphasizes that Booth “experiences both inside and outside the text the book’s depiction of Utah, its people, and Gilmore’s family,” and is thus “a character, if unnamed, in the very text he is reading in a way he would not be were it fiction” (1997: 115). Thus, a literary theorist and critic is viewed as a potential character in a literary text that he comments upon.⁴²

Booth himself takes up the question of actuality and its representation in *The Executioner’s Song* only in a footnote and makes a larger issue of the idiosyncratic textual and rhetorical style of Mailer’s book. Lehman, however, takes Booth’s brief reference to the representation of reality much further, claiming that the world depicted in Mailer’s narrative “cannot be neutral,” and the role of its author is also in no way “neutral or aesthetically ‘implied’”: “Mailer is, after all, at once a character interpreting Booth’s socio-religious heritage, a historical figure, and an author (‘implied’ or otherwise) whom Booth has read and interpreted in texts over the years” (1997: 115). Lehman shares Booth’s reading experience according to which Mailer has “a physical presence that hovers over the [nonfiction] novel,” and because of this Mailer seems to be an organizing force doing what he wants to do with his real people and real events. Of course, another kind of ethical criticism would ask whether this reading is largely based on the impression of Mailer’s strong and colorful ego, known outside this narra-

⁴² Even more strikingly, Gary Gilmore’s brother Mikal, a character in *The Executioner’s Song*, later wrote his own version of the crime and punishment of his brother, *Shot in the Heart*. Interestingly, Mailer’s book now has a role inside Mikal Gilmore’s narrative, and Mailer himself appears as a “character.” At first, Mikal Gilmore did not want to take part in Mailer’s project, for he “simply did not want to keep retelling and reliving the tragedy of [his] family.” After reading Mailer’s book, however, Gilmore thought that Mailer succeeded in not attempting “to make myth or discourse about Gary’s story, but instead seemed interested in the truths revealed through the unfolding of surface details: the interplay of characters and incidents that propelled the event with such fateful force” (1994: 368). Here we are presumably confronting a complex example of nonfictional communication, where the writer of one book (Norman Mailer) is a character in another written by the reader (Mikal Gilmore) of the first book, himself a character in both books.

tive – as already noted in my Introduction, Booth is himself critical toward this kind of “unjust” and “unethical” reading (see 1988: 151). From another viewpoint, Booth’s ethical stance appears to be too straightforward; on the question about the accuracy of Mailer’s representation of the people of Utah he is believed to misread the book “by oversimplifying” (Cook 1993: 134). By contrast to Booth’s wondering whether *Executioner* aims at constructing any “friendship” with the reader, Albert Cook points to the technique and structure of the book as constructing the reader’s expectations and interpretive strategies.

Booth’s contesting the way the narrative represents Utah and its people is an interesting case study for the theory of literary nonfiction. It confirms the distinction between fiction and nonfiction: while fiction does not provide *different* versions of the *same* reality/actuality (but is likely to create its own world), nonfiction is always open to negotiation and challenge provided by readers and other versions. As Booth emphasizes in *The Company We Keep*, he is interested in the reading process itself, its ethical implications and consequences, and the reader’s “friendship” and “company” with the text. When he has to encounter Mailer’s extremely long book, with its morally difficult subject matter (murder, death penalty, and execution), he finds himself in odd and demanding company. Booth feels that Mailer’s long narrative draws him, as a reader, to contemplate and attempt to understand violence in contemporary America. One of the ethical effects of such reading is an apparent position of “reading against” such a narrative which seems to “forgive the unforgivable,” that is, to feel deep sympathy toward murderer Gary Gilmore (see 1988: 209). According to Booth, the reading of a narrative of such an extreme length necessarily evokes the terminology of companionship, good or bad, but always complex, varying, and many-sided.

Booth seems to suggest that the reading of nonfiction, with its real events, people, lives and deaths, produces more actual and thus more disturbing ethical consequences than the reading of fiction – which is precisely what Lehman argues. In my next chapter, focusing on *Oswald’s Tale*, I aim to discuss more closely the specific rhetoric (and ethics) of nonfictional narrative.

Chapter VI

History as Mystery: The Rhetoric of Nonfiction in Oswald's Tale

Narratology and narrative theories in general emphasize a communicative model of narration, focusing on the situation when somebody tells a story to someone. Literary and narrative communication can be traditionally defined in the manner of the Jakobsonian model, according to which an addresser sends a message through a particular medium to an addressee. This kind of communication has often been understood, or misunderstood, as meaning simply a one-sided communicative channel, where the reader tries to interpret the author's already fixed meanings and intentions. We may speak, on one level, of the communication between a textual author and a textual reader, but "the textual reader need not coincide with the author's conception of the audience: this reader-figure may be a *rhetorical strategy*, a role which the author wishes the audience to assume (or even reject)" (Onega & García Landa 1996: 9; my emphasis). In his book *The Matters of Fact*, Daniel Lehman speaks of the dialogical, dialectical, and interactive feature of *nonfictional* communication, focusing on "nonfiction's rhetorical effects as communications rituals" (1997: 37). Basing his theory of nonfiction upon recent developments in the rhetorical and ethical theory of narrative, Lehman emphasizes the reader's "negotiative" interaction with nonfictional texts, for the position that both the text and the reader take belongs to actual cultural and human experience.

When speaking of *literary* texts, we should note that rhetoric is an art and style of writing which draws its reader's focus to the argumentative and communicative situation. In Lehman's scheme, it is important to examine the effects of nonfiction as a form of written communication as well as artistic expression. The rhetorical theory of narrative thus considers both the

artist's narrative strategies and the reader's engagement with and response to those strategies. In what follows, I deal with the specificities of the rhetorical art in nonfiction, and the ways in which nonfictional narrative delineates its author, implies its reader, and deals with its subject matter (such as an actual character or a historical event). My main examples are from *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* (1995), Mailer's documentary narrative about the life of Lee Harvey Oswald and the events surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy. *Oswald's Tale* raises questions about the relation between ethics and aesthetics along with the question of the relationship between the text and the responses of its audience. However, what further complicates this kind of rhetorical communication between author, text, and reader in *Oswald's Tale* is its very subject matter, a paradigmatic example of mystery in contemporary American history.

Rhetoric and Response: The Collaboration of Author and Reader

Rhetoric and Ethics

In Cicero's view, special topics that the rhetorician (or the orator) uses – such as ideas, terms, distinctions, value proportions, texts and histories – are not seen as “determinate and fixed facts and truths, but as more or less negotiable, interpretable possibilities for argument” (Jost 1995: 27). Whereas philosophy can be seen as inquiry into truths, rhetoric is more likely “the art of discovering warrantable beliefs and improving those beliefs in shared discourse” and “the art of proving what men believe they ought to believe, rather than proving what is true according to some abstract methods” (Booth 1974a: xiii). In rhetorical criticism connected with literary studies, the techniques and devices used in a narrative text are not seen as happening in a vacuum but are related to the specific purposes and aims of the text. What is meant by “rhetorical acts” in literary communication are those modes where the author shapes readers into the audiences envisioned while writing, and where readers attempt to join these “implied” audiences.

According to Wayne Booth's original notion in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, literary narratives are “viewed as the art of communicating with the readers – the rhetorical resources available to the writer of epic, novel, or short story as he tries, consciously or unconsciously, to impose his fictional

world upon the reader” (1983: xiii).¹ It is a part of Booth’s formulation of rhetorical and ethical criticism that author and reader, or speaker and listener, have their mutual relationship which is more complicated and interactive than that of the direct sender-receiver communicative model. In his book *Narrative as Rhetoric*, James Phelan comments on his own theory’s debt to Booth’s rhetorical notion of narrative as a distinctive and powerful means for an author to communicate knowledge, feelings, values, and beliefs to an audience. As Phelan formulates it, the literary text presents “a multidimensional (aesthetic, emotive, ideational, ethical, political) invitation to a reader who, in turn, seeks to do justice to the complexity of the invitation and then responds” (1996: xi). The ethical and rhetorical communication is understood as dialogic, including the reader’s response to the text and its author. Adam Zachary Newton, in his book *Narrative Ethics*, is concerned with “the ethical consequences of narrating a story and fictionalizing a person, and the reciprocal claims binding teller, listener, witness, and reader in that process” (1995: 11).² Of course, as theorists of nonfiction would argue, these ethical consequences – such as the process of *fictionalizing* a person – may differ significantly depending on whether we read and respond to fiction or nonfiction, especially if we have any extratextual knowledge of the character that is “created” in the narrative text. This is one of the questions to be grappled with in this chapter. Another notable study in this field, Andrew Gibson’s *Postmodernity, Ethics, and the Novel*, suggests that questions of narratives as modes of knowledge and questions of what is known in a narrative, by whom and about what, from what perspective, articulated in what terms, and in what manner, all appear as questions with “an ethical bearing” (1999: 54). However, Emmanuel Levinas, whose philosophy provides the basis for Gibson’s theory, quite rigidly distinguishes ethics from *rhetoric*, since for him rhetoric (like propaganda) closes off all possibility of dialogue with *the other*. In Gibson’s words, “rhetoric is the violence which

¹ As Dorrit Cohn believes, Booth is mainly interested in narratives which are “told by a loudly audible, moralistically judgmental narrator” and which are “designed to propagate clear and absolute values, beliefs authoritatively held and didactically targeted,” but in which “the judgmental narrator is not understood as a spokesman for the author but as a fictional voice whose normative comments on characters and events may not be reliable” (1999: 177, 179).

² Newton actually formulates his own narrative ethics as a critical answer to Booth’s ‘liberal-humanist’ practice, where literary communication is seen as proceeding “from author through text to reader” (1995: 65; cf. Vesala-Varttala 1999: 13). In a more complex way, Newton constructs three kinds of ethical structure, *narrational* (the communication between author-reader and narrator-narratee), *representational* (the representation of events and creating of characters), and *hermeneutic* (the reading and interpreting texts with a certain responsibility toward texts). For a critique on both Booth’s and Newton’s models, see Phelan (2005: 21-22).

refuses to listen, refuses exchange, assimilation, hybridization, self-reflexivity” (ibid.: 59). Interestingly, this notion of rhetoric is opposed to the idea of ‘narrative as rhetoric’ as suggested by Phelan and other critics, who argue that rhetoric can also be a mode of *ethical* communication, conversation, and exchange.³

As subsequent refinements of Booth’s ethical and rhetorical criticism, especially in the collection *Rhetoric & Pluralism*, suggest, Booth’s approach is complex in its own right. Booth speaks of the ethics of the narratives themselves, which means that individual narratives can carry their “radically contrasting ethical powers” that cannot only be explained from “outside,” from the actual reader’s position. Rather, it is the question of how a certain narrative text implies its own ethics and its own ways of reading (see Booth 1988: 9). What is crucial is the reading process and practice itself, the “experience of narrative” and our attempt to “keep company” as we read (or listen to) narratives. The ethical and rhetorical criticism as suggested and practiced by Booth (and some of his followers) is based not on ‘universals’ but on ‘particulars,’ not on theoretical mystifications but on our human experience of literary texts.⁴ This approach is supported for example by Walter Jost, who suggests that “rhetoric really lives only at the level of concrete examples, cases, problems” (1995: 35). Similarly, Michael Kearns, in his *Rhetorical Narratology*, states that rhetoric has always been interested in the interaction between text and audience in specific time-bound contexts (see 1999: 8). A related notion of *ethics* is represented by Levinas in the sense that “a significant ethics can have nothing to do with any transcendental sanction, any abstract principles or rules” (Gibson 1999: 57). It makes sense to discuss narrative ethics only in terms of specific, individual texts (including nonfictional narratives) and the relationship between their rhetoric and idea content.

³ Phelan suggests that the doubled communicative situation of fictional and much nonfictional narration – somebody telling us that somebody is telling somebody else that something happened – is itself a *layered* ethical situation. According to Phelan’s model, the rhetorical approach to narrative seeks to account for the cognitive, emotive, and ethical dimensions of reading (see 2005: 20, 160).

⁴ The experience and practice of literature, its production and reception, becomes illuminated in Booth’s concept of *coduction*, which means that one’s experience and act of reading is compared with other such experiences and acts. Coduction is to be understood as “the production of interpretation or evaluation through conversation with other readers” (Phelan 1996: 216; 2005: 214). Booth understands the ideal rhetorical communication through the principle of not only “Yes” or “But” but “Yes, but...,” which means an attempt to understand and do justice to a literary work “while vitalizing the critical conversation further, in an intriguing variety of directions” (Antczak 1995: 10).

When dealing with a rhetorical relationship between author, text, and reader, Phelan focuses on “the complex, multilayered processes of writing and reading, processes that call upon our cognition, emotions, desires, hopes, values, and beliefs” (1996: 19). The rhetorical theory of narrative consequently emphasizes a certain “ethical positioning,” a notion according to which narrative technique and structure position hypothetical audiences in relation to the narrative, while individual readers always read narratives from specific positions of their own. A rhetorical approach to ethical criticism thus “links matters of form and technique to the responses not just of the authorial audience but also to flesh-and-blood readers” (Phelan and Martin 1999: 89; cf. Phelan 2005: 59-60). It is important to note here that “narratives provoke complex, sometimes incommensurable, ethical responses from individual readers,” and “readers position themselves by bringing their own ethical standards to bear on texts” (Herman 1999: 17). In fact, the very complexity of the ethical response to narrative texts is characterized by Phelan and Martin’s delineation of “the dynamic interaction of four ethical situations”: (1) that of the characters within the story world; (2) that of the narrator in relation to the telling; (3) that of the implied author in relation to the authorial audience; and (4) that of the flesh-and-blood reader in relation to the narrative’s values and beliefs (see 1999: 100). Representing “postclassical” narratology, this approach also suggests how the reader’s own individual ethics plays a crucial role in shaping his or her response to the narrative, especially if the narrative text confronts one’s own values and beliefs. Let me reiterate that this kind of “ethical positioning” may function differently in nonfiction as compared to fiction.

When speaking of the ways in which a work of nonfiction creates an effect of both actuality and subjectivity in the reader, Lehman (partly drawing from Phelan) refers especially to those quite common cases where the reader already possesses some social, cultural, and historical knowledge about the events and persons dealt with in the narrative text. In fact he argues that “if the reader does not know (or does not care) that tragedies portrayed in such texts affect or have affected actual people, then the text will be read primarily as fiction, regardless of its author’s intent.” For example the reader who is not familiar with the assassination of President Kennedy, “will not be implicated in the same way as a reader who recognizes actual characters and cares about how the memories of such events are preserved and adjusted” (1997: 118). As mentioned above, factual narratives assume their position in the field of textual “competition.” Roland Carpenter, in his *History as Rhetoric*, speaks of “the world of pragmatic affairs” where “‘rival stories’ confront people” and where, very importantly, “discourse affects readers”

(1995: 6). Such phenomena clearly belong to the ethics and pragmatics of reading factual narratives, like historical narratives which claim to deal with common and public reality. However, poetics is not clearly distinguished from ethics, because the very poetic, narrative, and rhetorical composition of factual and historical texts has a strong effect on the reader.

Oswald's Tale, taking its position in the field of competition between different textual versions and representations of the Oswald/Kennedy case, potentially always faces a critical, competent, and perhaps even resistant reader familiar with other texts treating the same case. When referring to "the uneasy relationship that blooms when an author assumes narrative control over an actual experience shared, even obliquely, by the reader" in relation to *The Executioner's Song*, Lehman might as well be speaking of *Oswald's Tale* (see 1997: 119). The sheer fact that the Oswald/Kennedy case is more (in)famous, more complex and mysterious than the story of Gary Gilmore, is of crucial importance. The reading of nonfiction opens a dialogue between an author and the subject, and when this subject matter is presented through a textual and narrative voice, the reader is likely to attach this voice to the actual author and to "examine the narrator of the text (the unseen listener-teller-organizer of dialogue and events) against what we know of the limitations and possibilities of a nonfiction author" (ibid.: 74). A purely narratological version of the implied author (and the implied reader) may successfully explain *fiction*, because a fictional work is in a sense a "closed" system referring primarily to the fictional world it has constructed (a world which can be reconstructed by the reader). But nonfiction is, to extend the metaphor, an "open" system, because it can never completely construct its reference world, which must be the actual world. I will, however, have to return to the question of the implied author in *nonfiction*.

As Marie-Laure Ryan has it, the reader of fiction pays attention both to the nature of the narrator's act in the fictional world and to the quality of the author's performance in the actual world, whereas "in the case of nonfiction, the reader engages emotionally and imaginatively in the represented situation but retains a critical attitude toward the accuracy of the report and the rhetorical devices through which the author defends his version of the events" (2001: 98). In fiction, an implied author may represent the idea, meaning, intention, and construction of the text "behind" the narrative voice, and the fiction may be explained if we are able to open this closed system. To use Umberto Eco's metaphor, we travel through the forests of fiction in order to find the Model Author and thus become Model Readers (see 1994: 8, 24). As is well known, Eco actually speaks of "open" texts (like those of Joyce), which are apparently open to the reader's creative

work. However, for Eco, “an open text outlines a ‘closed’ project of its Model Reader as a component of its structural strategy” (1981 [1979]: 9). In nonfiction, by contrast, despite the author’s attempts to tell the truth and reach conclusions (compare Gerald Posner’s version of the Oswald drama, *Case Closed* [1993] or Patricia Cornwell’s “closing the case” of Jack the Ripper in *Portrait of a Killer* [2002]), gaps and questions may remain. Therefore, a fuller and deeper account of the same case can potentially be written.

Authorial and Narrative Audiences

The factual claims of *Oswald’s Tale* contain what Lehman calls “an either-or invitation to the reader” leading to negotiation “as the reader engages the text” (1997: 37). In *Oswald’s Tale* the author’s “invitation” to the reader is made explicit through the classical author-reader communication with the offer of cooperation emphasized by the use of the first-person plural:

Because our facts will often be fogged in, let us at least look to agree on this much – that we, author and reader, are in collaboration to explore a mystery, our own largest American mystery, and move forward on that understanding into the excerpts, the transcripts, and the speculations of Volume Two. (OT 353; my emphasis)

In this paragraph we may again note Mailer’s typical self-consciousness about nonfictional construction. He does not let us forget that he has produced this text in various ways, and in this manner his role and position as author-narrator emerges in the narrative, explicitly in those sections where he “stops” the narrative and begins to discuss its techniques, materials, process of production, and intentions. What we see here is the author discussing with his readers the possible ways of reconstructing (through speculation and documentation) the Oswald-Kennedy case, “our greatest American mystery” or, as the author also defines it, “the labyrinth that still remains unexplored” (OT 607).⁵ In his *Rhetoric of Motives*, Kenneth Burke suggested that we must concede “the great persuasive power of mystery” (1969

⁵ Obviously, whereas the historical event (the assassination of Kennedy) itself is “mysterious,” *Oswald’s Tale* follows nonfictional practice in its attempt to clarify this mystery (at least to some degree). In comparison, *Harlot’s Ghost* creates a more mysterious narrative form in its imaginative exploration of the CIA’s possible involvement in the assassination (see Chapter II). Compare also Klaus Brax’s study *The Poetics of Mystery* which focuses on generic conventions and narrative modes that help to create the sense of mystery, ambiguity, and indeterminacy in John Fowles’s historical fiction (cf. 2003: 16 and *passim*).

[1950]: 278; cf. Anderson 1987: 69). Jacob Mey argues from the viewpoint of literary pragmatics:

Corresponding to the author's *creative* activity, we need the reader's cooperation as an indispensable ingredient in the making of the literary pudding, whose final proof is in its eating, its consumption by a reader, who is not only collaborating with the author, but actively *re-creating* the literary production in his or her own image. The author of course knows this, and tries in various ways to ensure the readers' involvement in the process: either by making direct appeals to the readers [or] by involving the readers in the narrative context in an attempt to secure their interest and cooperation. (2000: 296)

The author therefore *needs* the reader as a “collaborator” and “co-creator” of the text, and to ensure the reader's involvement, the author employs a variety of rhetorical strategies, including direct audience-addressing rhetoric.

In the middle of the narrative of *Oswald's Tale* we hear the author-narrator's emerging voice, as if presenting a kind of self-defence. In a characteristically Mailerian manner, the medium in question begins to reflect on its own nature and intentions:

Let me propose, then, that a mystery of the immense dimensions of Oswald's case will, in the writing, create a form of its own somewhere between fiction and non-fiction. Technically, this book fits into the latter category – it is most certainly not fiction. The author did his best to make up no dialogue himself and attribute no private motives to his real characters unless he was careful enough to label all such as speculation. Still, it is a peculiar form of non-fiction, since not only interviews, documents, newspaper accounts, intelligence files, recorded dialogues, and letters are employed, but speculations as well. The author's musings become some of the operative instruments. Of course, speculation is often an invaluable resource of the novelist. The result can be seen, therefore, as a special species of non-fiction that can be put under the rubric of *mystery*. That is because all means of inquiry have to be available when one is steering one's way through a cloud – especially if there are arguments about the accuracy of the navigating instruments, which in this case are the facts. (OT 353)

As one critic puts it, the result here is not only a certain exuberance, but also a new biographical mode: “Mailer borrows the term ‘mystery’ to connote a narrative that operates somewhere between fiction and nonfiction (i.e., between biography and the novel)” (Keener 2001: 78). I believe that a work of literary nonfiction functions in the overlap between novelistic fiction and purely factual discourse, foregrounding both poetic and referential function and implicating its author in its embedded narrative or *mise en abyme* structure. The distinction between fiction and nonfiction is not taken as an *a priori* constraint according to which the narrative would be “forced”

to move on. More likely, as the author must “navigate” through “a cloud,” he has to question the accuracy of the facts – which is one way of saying that a mysterious historical event requires a new kind of narrative approach.

Significantly, the author’s rhetoric tries to draw the reader’s attention to the “peculiar” textual construction and how it will, *in the writing*, create its form. Thus the reader, while “immersed” in the story-world of the narrative, simultaneously pays attention to the means by which this narrative is made. Ryan distinguishes four degrees of absorption in the act of reading: (1) *concentration* (the type of attention devoted to difficult or experimental texts); (2) *imaginative involvement* (the “split” reading attitude in which the reader transports him- or herself to the narrative world but is still able to keep an aesthetic/epistemological distance); (3) *entrancement* (a “nonreflexive” reading position where the reader is completely caught up in the narrative world, taking pleasure in it); and (4) *addiction* (for example: “The loss of the capacity to distinguish textual worlds, especially those of fiction, from the actual world”) (2001: 98-99). From the rhetorical viewpoint, the different levels of “absorption” may be called actual, textual, and story-level. In his or her attempt to read the narrative and respond to it, the reflexive reader considers all these levels and experiences all or most of them.

As Peter Rabinowitz puts it in his book *Before Reading*, there are several different ways of appropriating a text. Instead of only analyzing separate kinds of approaches to texts, Rabinowitz aims at formulating “*simultaneous* roles that the audience of a text can play,” and thus he makes the distinction between the actual, authorial, and narrative audience. The *actual audience* refers to actual readers in their own socio-cultural contexts, with their personal expectations and desires. The *authorial audience*, on the other hand, is a more or less hypothetical (and thus less actual) audience, for which authors rhetorically design their books, making assumptions about the readers’ beliefs, knowledge, and familiarity with conventions. While the idea of an authorial audience is connected with authorial intention, what is more crucial in the rhetorical and dialogical communication is that the reader tries to join “a particular social/interpretive community.” This means “the acceptance of the author’s invitation to read in a particular socially constituted way that is shared by the author and his or her expected readers” (1987: 22). Like Barbara Foley, who speaks of a “contract” between authors and readers in their attempt to understand both literature and reality (see 1986: 43), Rabinowitz believes that there are certain common rules of writing and reading. According to this notion, actual readers are able to take positions inside the literary texts they read and consequently to distance themselves from their social backgrounds, from their own immediate needs and interests.

As Rabinowitz argues, “every author designs his or her work rhetorically for a specific hypothetical audience” (1987: 94). While this audience is the addressee of the author’s voice and intent, we need to distinguish yet another audience, namely the *narrative audience*, for which the narrator (always potentially distinct from the author) is telling the story. Instead of using the narratological concept of the ‘narratee,’ who is a person or a larger audience in the story-world, Rabinowitz stresses that the *narrative audience* “is a role which the text forces the reader to take on” (ibid.: 95). This audience is likely to take the narrator’s presentation of the story-world as “real,” accepting it in the mode of “make-believe” or “willing suspension of disbelief.” Although the reader may know that the world of fiction is not real, he or she may also find pleasure in accepting it as real for the time of the reading. The difference between actual and narrative audiences is, then, that actual readers take and accept a new position on the level of the narrative in their act of reading. But what further distinguishes the narrative audience from the authorial one may be, in Rabinowitz’s words, that “the authorial audience knows it is reading a work of art, while the narrative audience believes what it is reading is real” (ibid.: 100; cf. Rabinowitz 1994b: 203, 210n).⁶ We might argue that this distinction does not work in nonfiction, where it is also the supposition of the *authorial audience* that what it is reading is real. Nevertheless, the model of different audience levels may be adapted to the reader-audience’s involvement both in the ‘mimetic’ level of characters and events and the ‘synthetic’ or ‘artificial’ level of textual construction.⁷

Still, the ultimate question remains whether “nonfictions” are finally about “real” worlds. Even in nonfiction, the reader becomes “immersed” in the textual world, identifying him- or herself with the narrative audience yet not forgetting that an authorial voice is always present (cf. Ryan 1997: 167; Kearns 1999: 35). Consequently, as members of the narrative audience we *want* to take narrative worlds as real entities, transparently communicated to us from some anonymous origin, but as members of the authorial audience we are aware (whether we like it or not) that *someone made* this, that the narrative world is a constructed one. When reading the Bible, Booth

⁶ As William Nelles also notes, the narrator and the narratee (or the narrative audience) may, and usually do, believe that the text represents reality and not fiction, whereas the implied author and the implied reader (or the authorial audience) are always aware of the fictional status of the text (see 1997: 61).

⁷ For example, if we take “Mailer” on the story level to be a kind of narrator-character expressing his admiration for Muhammad Ali in *The Fight*, not all readers would take this position (some might be for Foreman). However, as members of the authorial audience we should regard the way Mailer uses Ali as a thematic and synthetic component reflecting the deeper idea of his book, including the mythical deep level behind the realistic surface level.

experiments with taking a position in the authorial audience, and this position helps him to see that a 'made-up' story is being told. Thus, Booth argues, stories will work as stories only if "the flesh-and-blood listener will join an authorial audience that shares with the implied author at least a fair number of basic assumptions about life and its realities" (1996: 236). What Booth also argues, however, is that it is relatively easy to be absorbed by the Bible's narrative flood and join its narrative audience, for the author or authors remain anonymous and there is little possibility to verify the "facts." Some "factual" narratives produce the illusion that the facts speak for themselves, while others evoke more self-reflexive and self-critical author-narrators drawing their readers into discussion about the reliability of memory or about the relevance of specific historical facts. These more "critical" or "reflexive" modes of nonfiction (as I would call them) present an author who wants an authorial audience critically divorced from the narrative audience.

The self-reflexive nonfictional communication is constructed upon the recognition of the author's predicament: the author has no ultimate knowledge or certainty. More visibly, the author is thinking and speculating, as though contemplating and reflecting on his or her representation *while writing*, and this is what Mailer does in *Oswald's Tale* when pointing out "the author's musings" (OT 353). As Booth writes (with reference to Stephen Hawking), "[t]he author implies an authorial audience made up of those who know that he is inevitably speculating, going at points far beyond any actual scientific evidence" (1996: 248). As I have suggested earlier, when reading nonfictional narratives, we encounter what seems to be a paradox: the author is at his or her most credible and convincing when critically examining the processes of textual representation instead of trying to give us a clear transparent window to the world of facts. It is because of this characteristic feature of literary nonfiction that the division between narrative and authorial audiences seems as valid in nonfictional communication as it is in a fictional one. This means that the narrative audience of Mailer's story of Oswald is intended to take the historical world as reality and to be mimetically and emotionally engaged with it, while the book's authorial audience reflects upon those devices and techniques that make up this textual construct.⁸

⁸ We may recall Ryan's definition which problematizes the basic notion according to which "nonfiction describes the real world and the reader is already there." Rather, as Ryan argues, in nonfiction there are two interpretive operations: one in which the reader *constructs* the text and one in which the reader *evaluates* the text (see 2001: 104; see also Chapter I).

The Complexities of a (Post)modernist Event

In *Oswald's Tale* Mailer announces that factual evidence will never provide the final solution of a mystery. In *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer tries to make sense of a multidimensional event, attempting, through his writing, “to elucidate the mysterious character of that quintessentially American event.” An ambiguous, even mysterious historical event can, however, be adequately approached through a self-reflexive, (post)modernist style (cf. Lehtimäki [forthcoming]). I will begin by comparing Mailer’s beliefs to Hayden White’s theories of emplotment, especially White’s notion that the “modernist event” requires a modernist style. Then I will move on to an analysis of *Oswald's Tale* in relation to Don DeLillo’s novel *Libra*, which also deals with the Oswald/Kennedy case. In my view, the representation of a complex “(post)modernist” event is thematized in DeLillo’s and Mailer’s narratives, turning both of them into metatextual representations.

Mailer, White, and the Absurdity of History

According to one version, the age of (American) postmodernism started on that fateful day in Dallas, 22 November, 1963 (see McCaffery 1986: xxi). The Kennedy assassination has been read as “the first postmodern historical event” that “changed America, put an end to its innocent conviction of invincibility, gave birth to the culture of paranoia” (Cowart 2002: 95). As Joseph Tabbi suggests when discussing the representations of the Kennedy assassination, “if a total naturalistic or sociological representation of events is no longer possible, if reality [...] is no longer realistic, that perception in itself is a basis for creating a recalcitrant, ambiguous, and self-consciously ‘mysterious’ fiction” (1995: 176-77). In *Oswald's Tale* Mailer’s authorial narrative voice constructs and emplots his own mythology on the basis of involute historical data, making Oswald a tragic hero whose “vision” included killing the President. However, this kind of construction and emplotting is not necessarily tantamount to *fictionalization*.

It should be recalled that narrative techniques of historiography and the different ways of emplotting history are foregrounded in White’s theoretical discussion. It is only by keeping in mind White’s strong emphasis on narrativization (“the narrative mode of representation is [so] natural to human consciousness” [1987: 26]) that we may understand, and perhaps tolerate, arguments like this one:

With respect to the question of how most responsibly to represent the Holocaust, the most extreme position is *not* that of the so-called revisionists, who deny that this event ever happened; but, rather, that of those who hold that this event is of such a kind as to escape the grasp of *any* language even to describe it and of *any* medium – verbal, visual, oral, or gestural – to represent it, much less of any merely historical account adequately to explain it. (1999: 79)

As White believes, no historical event is *intrinsically tragic* and, depending on the historian's choice of *plot structure*, the very same set of events can serve as components of a story that is either tragic *or* comic (see 1978: 84-85). In White's theory, the emphasis is always upon emplotment and narrativization.⁹ As he argues, "one narrative account may represent a set of events as having the form and meaning of an epic or tragic story, while another may represent the same set of events – *with equal plausibility and without doing any violence to the factual record* – as describing a farce" (1999: 28; my emphasis). What poetic and rhetorical transformation of factual materials means in White's conception, then, is a similar kind of emplotting and narrativization in both fictional and historical narratives. This general notion is confirmed by White's rather non-reflective belief that the same set of events can be represented almost in any which way with equal plausibility and without doing *any* violence to the factual record.¹⁰

As noted in Chapter I, White's "relativist" view of history and its representation can be counterpoised by a pragmatic and semantic understanding of literary production and communication, including an understanding of the practice of literary nonfiction. According to David Price, White's theory asserts that "all history is made; it is made of language; and, as such, it is allusive, ambiguous, contradictory, semantically abundant – in short, creative in every sense of the word" (1999: 23). Lubomír Doležel notes that "[i]n the postmodernist perspective, historiography is a web of more or less interesting stories, governed by narrative patterns and tropological shifts, but with only an incidental connection to the human past and present" (1999:

⁹ Monika Fludernik suggests that White's concept of 'narrativization' should be understood more likely as 'storification' because it "relies exclusively on the establishment of a plot" (1996: 34).

¹⁰ In White's scheme, "narrativization" both makes and saves history. From an ethical and pragmatic viewpoint this notion is, however, problematic: "Recent decades have brought heated debate about the implications of history as narrative, since narrative's aesthetic and ethical coherence inevitably compromises empirical correspondence. That history employs narrative does not, however, turn history into fiction [...]; history's narratives of remembrance are 'a range of interpretations' of precious facts, to whose preservation the historian remains deeply committed: once lost, no narration will save them" (Borch 2001: 10).

253).¹¹ A kind of “equal plausibility” in representing any historical events is a sign of a “postmodern” stance that Mailer himself critically reflects upon in *Oswald's Tale*:

We have come at least to *the philosophical crux of our inquiry*: It would state that the sudden death of a man as large in his possibilities as John Fitzgerald Kennedy is more tolerable if we can perceive his killer as tragic rather than absurd. This is because absurdity corrodes our species. The mounting ordure of a post-modern media fling (where everything is equal to everything else) is all the ground we need for such an assertion. (OT 198; my emphasis)

According to Mailer's mythical scheme, corresponding to Manichean and kabbalistic principles, every act must be understood as significant and meaningful in the framework of the larger battle between good and evil. To approach this “mystic existentialism” from the viewpoint of the sexual act, we may recall Mailer's belief in *The Prisoner of Sex* that “the Lord, Master of Existential Reason, was not thus devoted to *the absurd* as to put the orgasm in the midst of the act of creation without the cause of the profoundest sort” (PS 87; my emphasis). To admit that any act (be it sex or murder) is meaningless is to suggest, in Mailer's philosophy, that there is no God, only a chaos of absurdity and emptiness. If this is the case, then “there was no logic to the event [of the assassination] and no sense of balance in the universe” (OT 606). But if there is God (and the Devil), Oswald's act (based upon the speculation that he was the assassin) is an individual act of “creation” *with* the “cause of the profoundest sort.” Mailer accordingly wants to frame Oswald's aims and visions within “the cabalistic sense” according to which God first conceives of the world and then makes it. Thus to say that you have done something which you have not yet done becomes “the first and essential step in shaping the future”: “It is as if the future cannot exist without an *a priori* delineation of it” (OT 569). At least this is Oswald's own vision (again, in Mailer's model), his partaking in the cosmic battle between good and evil without a clear knowledge whether he is on the side of God or the Devil. Such is, apparently, the philosophical crux of Mailer's *own* inquiry. A reflexive reader is able to see that what we have here is a strong authorial voice communicating the author's personal vision and version to his audience.¹²

¹¹ The crucial example is provided by the so-called Holocaust test, which, according to Doležel, makes even White for the first time admit “that a mode of emplotment can be a distortion rather than an interpretation of history” (1999: 252). Doležel's conclusion is that White's theory of history fails the Holocaust test and thus the failed test “reveals most tellingly [the] fundamental weaknesses of White's theory,” for instance its inability to take into account the truth-conditionality of historical representation.

¹² In his own words, Oswald was a “scapegoat” or a “patsy”; this interpretation of his role has become part of widespread conspiracy theories. Mailer, however, thinks other-

On the basis of his personal philosophy, Mailer argues that our fashionable postmodernist belief in the irony and absurdity of the social world inadequately captures the ultimate sense of *tragedy* in contemporary (American) history.¹³ As Tabbi suggests, being committed to a rhetoric of opposition Mailer is concerned with the limitations that fashionable postmodernist irony presents, refusing “the easy acceptance of an irony that not only kills the sublime by reducing it to bathos but also too easily masks a bland acceptance of the consensus culture” (1995: 55, 73). In this light, Mailer would hardly agree with White that the same set of historical events and factual documents can be plausibly represented and “figured” in different story patterns with an equal status, be they tragic or comical. However, there is a connection between Mailer’s and White’s notions as regards an antithesis between *ironic* and politically engaged world views (see Whalen-Bridge 1998: 122). In his *Metahistory*, White argues that “as the basis of a world view, irony tends to dissolve all belief in the possibility of positive political actions” and “in its apprehension of the essential folly or absurdity of the human condition, it tends to engender belief in the ‘madness’ of civilization itself” (1973: 38).¹⁴ In our imagined confrontation between Mailer and White, the latter would still stress that as a historical event the assassination of Kennedy is “no longer observable, and hence it cannot serve as an object of a knowledge as certain as that about present events that can still be observed” (1999: 71). In White’s conclusion, as the event is “no longer observable,” “it is perfectly respectable to fall back upon

wise. Instead of continuing fashionable “Leftist” speculations about the conspiracy and about Oswald as a pawn in “their” game, Mailer in a way foregrounds his “conservative” vision of the case, making Oswald a romantic individual, a protagonist in a tragedy (see also Keener 2001: 83). To be exact, Mailer maintains that the book “was undertaken without a fixed conclusion in either direction” (OT 605), suggesting the open and ongoing (rhetorical) negotiation between the subject and its interpretation.

¹³ Mailer concludes his story of Oswald by referring to Dreiser and stating that “one would like to have used ‘An American Tragedy’ as the title for this journey through Oswald’s beleaguered life” (OT 791). The narrative of Dreiser’s novel *An American Tragedy*, based on a real-life case of murder and execution, closes with Grandmother’s thoughts: “Her darling boy. The light and color of her declining years” (Dreiser 1948 [1925]: 874). These thoughts are echoed in the end of *Oswald’s Tale*, with Oswald’s mother Marguerite defending the memory of her son. Earlier we are told that Oswald’s wife Marina “read a lot, particularly Theodore Dreiser. Marina loved Dreiser” (OT 22). For intertextual relations between Dreiser’s novel and Mailer’s *Executioner*, see Schleifer 1989.

¹⁴ As White phrases it, the historian “can *misfire*” since the historian’s audience would hardly accept “the emplotment of the life of President Kennedy as comedy, but whether it ought to be emplotted romantically, tragically, or satirically is an open question” (1978: 84; my emphasis). Actually, for White, “a serious theme – such as mass murder or genocide – demands a noble genre, such as epic or tragedy, for its proper representation” (1999: 31).

the time-honored tradition of representing such singular events as the assassination of the thirty-fifth president of the United States as a story and try to explain it by narrativizing (fabulating) it – as Oliver Stone did in *JFK*” (ibid.: 71-72). However, while there may be certain interesting affinities between Mailer and White, Mailer’s reflections upon the differences and similarities between fiction and nonfiction do not result in the blurring and merging of the distinction.

If we stay with our example, the Oswald/Kennedy case, we may see White suggesting that Oliver Stone’s controversial film *JFK* “is neither factual nor fictional but rather figurative” (1999: 187n). Here White’s suggestions seem to come close to my concept of literary nonfiction as an in-between mode; in other words, “a textual practice such as New Journalism aims at establishing a *middle point* between the poles of fiction and nonfiction” (Ryan 1997: 171; my emphasis). More generally, White speaks of such *modernist events* that seem to require “the new genres of postmodernist parahistorical representation,” both verbal and visual texts that comprise works like Stone’s *JFK*, DeLillo’s *Libra*, or Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song*, for that matter (see 1999: 67). However, what sounds problematic to me is White’s subjective collection of texts which “[a]ll deal with historical phenomena, and all of them appear to fictionalize, to a greater or lesser degree, the historical events and characters that serve as their referents in history”; consequently his claim that “[w]hat happens in the postmodernist docudrama or historical metafiction is [...] the placing in abeyance of the distinction between the real and the imaginary” (ibid.: 67-68). On this basis, White even argues that “*everything* is presented as if it were of *the same ontological order, both real and imaginary*” (ibid.: 68; my emphases). This kind of blurring of distinctions and merging of different texts and even genres together goes further still than some studies on postmodern fiction which make similar claims but on a more moderate level, as it were, when consciously focusing on fiction.¹⁵ In my view, lumping different literary modes and practices together as belonging to the same aesthetic, ontological, and epistemological level is a blind spot in White’s theory.

¹⁵ It is symptomatic that for White these new genres of postmodernist parahistorical representation can be *variously* called ‘docudrama,’ ‘faction,’ ‘infotainment,’ ‘the fiction of fact,’ ‘historical metafiction,’ “and the like” (1999: 67). Again, there seems to be no distinction between textual modes.

Postmodernist Fiction and Nonfiction: DeLillo and Mailer

The similarities and differences between “postmodernist” nonfiction and fiction can be tested by a comparison between Mailer’s *Oswald’s Tale* and Don DeLillo’s novel *Libra* (1988), both sharing the same reference world (Oswald/Kennedy) but constructed to serve deliberately different aims.¹⁶ *Libra* has been regarded as “a sometimes fictional, sometimes factual biography of Lee Harvey Oswald that blurs the boundaries of fact and fiction” (Lehman 1997: 25), or as a novel in which DeLillo achieves a complex literary form “by blending the mode of documentary with imaginative fiction” and by reworking “distinctions between fact and fancy, truth and fiction, objectivity and subjectivity” (Tabbi 1995: 176). Self-consciously using both fictional and documentary techniques, DeLillo’s novel reduces the reader’s ability to take this construction only as a pleasantly coherent “make-believe” and, instead, results in a powerfully disturbing reading experience.¹⁷ In its self-reflexive mode, *Libra* constructs a fictional writer, a retired CIA analyst Nicholas Branch, who is hired to write the “secret history” of the as-

¹⁶ As Tabbi argues, on the other hand, Mailer’s *Executioner* is “the most direct precursor to *Libra*” for example as regards “the relation of the author to a range of journalistic materials” (1995: 181). Like Mailer, DeLillo also constructs a large social and national vision through a combination of different viewpoints, documents, and ways of speaking, keeping his own narrative style on the level of simple, colloquial discourse. Tabbi also notes that DeLillo’s way of handling Oswald’s character, a figure “existing alone on the margins of society, a hapless systems builder who wants to immerse himself in history,” resembles Mailer’s vision of Gary Gilmore as a romantic-existentialist psychopath who feels deeply estranged from other people’s society (see *ibid.*: 183). Thus “Gilmore, like Oswald, lives a life of no clear direction, adrift in a culture that never seems real to him” (*ibid.*: 192). Of course, on the basis of his original ‘hipster’ thesis suggested in “The White Negro,” Mailer turns both these “murderers” in part into romantic figures, visionary individuals living with dangerous possibilities and trying to escape existential emptiness.

¹⁷ In his reading of *Libra*, Tabbi suggests that the novel “seems purposely to sustain a sense of aimlessness and a schizophrenic flatness in which all items have an equal, and equally affectless, significance,” but “the meaninglessness can be rescued only by the external reality of assassination” (1995: 191). The disturbing power of many nonfictions (like Mailer’s) or fictionalized histories (like DeLillo’s) emerges from the sense that despite an endless number of textual (verbal and visual) representations, the real event (Kennedy’s assassination) may still live in people’s memory. In his emphasis on the materiality of (dead) bodies outside the narrative text, Lehman maintains that “a reader with specific experience of events off the page ([...] a reader with actual memories of the Kennedy assassination) will bring a thick and sometimes unmanageable response to the nonfiction text because she recognizes its ability to construe her experience off the page” (1997: 27).

sassination of John F. Kennedy and who works with the same materials and problems as DeLillo, the actual writer of the novel: “Nicholas Branch sits in the book-filled room, the room of documents, the room of theories and dreams,” “the room of documents, of faded photographs” (DeLillo 1991 [1988]: 14, 183). Branch desperately feels that “there is enough mystery in the facts as we know them, enough of conspiracy, coincidence, loose ends, dead ends, multiple interpretations” (ibid.: 58). His complex and often frustrating work with endless materials (texts, films, photographs, records, testimonies, etc.) reflects the novelist’s attempts to achieve narrative coherence.

On the other hand, Oswald, too, is trying to write his own history in *Libra*, attempting to make the world meaningful to himself but constantly hampered by dyslexia, which makes him unable to verbalize his most complicated thoughts, feeling “the pain, the chaos of composition” (DeLillo 1991 [1988]: 211). Throughout DeLillo’s novel “Oswald attempts continually to construct himself, to put himself down on the page and give form to the chaos of reality” (Tabbi 1995: 190). Oswald’s political aim to change history – to take part in “the struggle, where there is no borderline between one’s personal world, and the world in general,” as he writes in his diary – is recognized both by DeLillo and Mailer, although in different ways. While DeLillo does not parody Oswald (as some other “postmodernist” writer might do), his narrative suggests the ultimate hopelessness of Oswald’s efforts to change world history. Mailer, on the other hand, wants to take Oswald’s political aims more seriously, even correcting the language of his writings, which are partly marred by dyslexia.¹⁸ Mailer still sees some continuing value in the Warren Commission reports, since “the twenty-six volumes will also be a Comstock Lode of *novelistic material*, [...] certainly to be honored for its short stories, historical vignettes, and vast cast of characters” (OT 351; my emphasis). DeLillo, using the figure of Nicholas Branch as a kind of embedded novelist in *Libra*, describes Branch as also facing “the Warren report, with its twenty-six accompanying volumes of testimony and exhibits, its millions of words” and reflecting that “this is the Joycean Book of America, remember – the novel in which nothing is left

¹⁸ In the Warren Commission reports these writings were, because of dyslexia, originally characterized as signs of madness. When discussing Oswald’s dyslexia, Mailer explains that “what you have seen in this book is not the precise letter he composed but a more finished product” (OT, “Appendix”: ii). In a similar vein, in his Afterword to *The Executioner’s Song* Mailer admits shaping some of Gary Gilmore’s letters: “[I]t seemed fair to show him at a level higher than his average. One wanted to demonstrate the impact of his mind on Nicole, and that might best be achieved by allowing his brain to have its impact on us” (ES 1052).

out” (1991 [1988]: 181, 182). What we grasp in DeLillo’s novel, then, is an image of a fictitious, embedded writer working with the commission reports together with endless transcripts of investigations, the FBI materials, the CIA’s volumes on Oswald, and various fictions, novels, plays, and films about the assassination.

While DeLillo in *Libra* locates “much of the book’s narrative in the solitude of Oswald’s mind, and in the comparable minds of invented conspirators and various other men” (Tabbi 1995: 188), Mailer, being conscious of the constraints of nonfiction, refrains from presuming to penetrate people’s minds and invent narrative scenes. At bottom, there is the reader’s pragmatic contention that *Libra* is written and meant to be a novel, while in *Oswald’s Tale* the author explicitly states that even though the narrative form is somewhere between fiction and nonfiction, “it is most certainly not fiction” (OT 353).¹⁹ To my mind, *Oswald’s Tale* is constructed somewhat differently from historical fiction, even differently from Mailer’s previous novel *Harlot’s Ghost*, which grapples with the same historical mysteries. Here Mailer tries to keep his “epistemology of facts” (PAP 171-72) separated from the ontologies of fictional world-creation.²⁰ For example, we may regard the self-consciousness Mailer displays in his oscillation between actual documents and sheer speculation:

MR. STERN: Now, as you made the right turn from Main Street onto Houston Street, did you observe anything about the windows of any building in your view?

MR. SORRELS: Yes, I did... The Book Depository, as we turned to the right on Houston Street, was right directly in front of us... [...] But I did not see any activity – no one moving around or anything like that... I do not, of course, remember seeing any object or anything like that in the windows such as a rifle or anything

¹⁹ DeLillo’s “Author’s Note” reads as follows: “This is a work of imagination. While drawing from the historical record, I’ve made no attempt to furnish factual answers to any questions raised by the assassination. Any novel about a major unresolved event would aspire to fill some of the blank spaces in the known record. To do this, I’ve altered and embellished reality, extended real people into imagined space and time, invented incidents, dialogues, and characters” (1991 [1988]: n.p.).

²⁰ Mailer makes a reference to *Harlot’s Ghost* in the middle of the narrative of *Oswald’s Tale*, using the CIA lectures of his *fictional* character “Harlot” Montague to reveal the secrets of the psychology of espionage (see OT 444). The narrator Harry Hubbard’s thousand-page long embedded “Alfa” manuscript ends in the ambiguous and fear-filled aftermaths of the Kennedy assassination, leaving the CIA men to ponder the mysterious question: “Who is this Oswald?” (HG 1149). Harlot himself represents the sentiments of the political hegemony: “Oswald, as the sole assassin, is, therefore, in everyone’s best service – KGB, FBI, CIA, DGI, Kennedys, Johnsons, Nixons, Mafia, Miami Cubans, Castro Cubans, even the Goldwater gang” (HG 1151). Obviously, this conclusion serves him best as well. Compare also: “Believing, like the author, in a Manichean vision steeped in conspiracies, Harlot may have been [...] the mastermind behind the Kennedy assassination” (Schuchalter 1993: 63).

pointing out the windows... No activity, no one moving around that I saw at all.
Let us put ourselves in the mind of a rifleman who has set himself up in a nest of book cartons on the sixth floor. (OT 672; my emphasis)

The interview above, conducted by the notorious Warren Commission, focuses on one subjective viewpoint; truthful or not, this subjective testimony is a factual document which exists outside Mailer's narrative. This means that *factuality* and *actuality* are matters different from each other. Mailer refers to almost all available factual and documentary material (interviews, transcripts, newspaper stories, diaries, letters, etc.), but he does not refer directly to the actual event, which is now buried under a huge amount of textual representation.

The most crucial point in the story of Lee Harvey Oswald is, obviously, the shooting of Kennedy: did Oswald do it? DeLillo's fiction actually shows Oswald shooting at Kennedy, even if not alone. In Mailer's nonfiction there is a critical blank scene, a gap, at this ultimate point: there is nobody who saw *Oswald* shooting from the sixth-floor window of the Texas School Book Depository. In the paragraph above we are not actually penetrating Oswald's mind; this is only speculation about the lone gunman's intentions and motives. In fact, as existing documents (like interviews) tell us, just after the shooting Oswald is seen on another floor drinking hot coffee: "[T]here is no greater evidence of his innocence than that he was so cool" (OT 679). As in *The Executioner's Song*, where Mailer actually leaves concrete white spaces, gaps and blanks between the paragraphs on the page, the material construction of *Oswald's Tale* suggests that there is not enough evidence to tell the whole story according to the rules of factuality. Thus Mailer refers to the actual lack of evidence (explicitly in the chapter entitled "Evidence"); in order to maintain its nonfictional status, *Oswald's Tale* must present the shooting scene indirectly, without attaching Oswald directly to it. DeLillo, in *Libra*, also uses narrative gaps and different viewpoints, still constructing a vivid picture which visualizes that there is not only Oswald in the sixth floor window but other assassins, too, in the grassy knoll. Still, the "conspiracy theory" imagined by DeLillo culminates in Oswald's own vision that it is *not he* who shoots the fatal "third bullet":

Lee was about to squeeze off the third round, he was in the act, he was actually pressing the trigger.

The light was so clear it was heartbreaking.

There was a white burst in the middle of the frame. A terrible splash, a burst. Something came blazing off the President's head. He was slammed back, surrounded all in dust and haze. Then suddenly clear again, down and still in the seat. Oh he's dead he's dead. (DeLillo 1991 [1988]: 400; my emphasis)

However, being unable to assume omniscience with regard to the events, DeLillo (or his narrator) sees the assassination according to well-known visual-cultural “frames” (especially influenced by the famous 8mm Zapruder film). In DeLillo’s narrative everything is experienced as “a kind of simulation, as if even those present were seeing the event through one or another of its many filmed versions,” and on this level of representation, also “Oswald’s view of things through the gun sight is no more real or determinate than any other view” (Tabbi 1995: 191).²¹ In its strikingly executed climax, *Libra* represents the assassination scene as in slow motion, capturing in detail those “seven seconds that broke the back of the American century” (1991 [1988]: 181). As we can see in the paragraph above, it is almost as if *Oswald* is watching the Zapruder film where there is “a white burst in the middle of *the frame*.” And in fact, after the shot that kills Kennedy, “Lee raised his head from the scope, looking right” and saw “a man on the wall with a camera” (ibid.: 400). That is Zapruder himself, of course: history is already being represented.

In Lehman’s words, *Libra* presents both Oswald and the Kennedy assassination “primarily through mediated images,” but the reader’s extratextual knowledge of the event (even though for most readers constructed by those very mediated images) to some extent disturbs the reading experience (see 1997: 120). Obviously, the fact that *Libra* presents the scene of the assassination partly through Oswald’s eyes (also penetrating his private thoughts – that is, representing them in an imaginary fashion) is a Cohnian “signpost” of fictionality that marks the novel’s distinction from the practice of non-fiction. Still, the assassination scene as a whole is not so much DeLillo’s fictional creation as it is his “metarepresentation,” constructed on the basis of existing representations and documentary evidence. When compared to *Libra*’s aesthetically complex blurring of fact and fiction, Mailer’s narrative appears somewhat bleak and straightforward in its concentration on Oswald as a biographical subject.²² In fact, Oswald as a biographical subject and as a human being almost disappears in DeLillo’s complex, ultimately textual

²¹ The Kennedy assassination has become a notorious example of a historical event about which there is more ambiguous and contradictory information than “primary materials” and reliable documents, so that even a visual record (like the Zapruder film) does not make the event real, clear, and understandable (see Cowart 2002: 97-98).

²² In a sense, *Oswald’s Tale* as a factually “constrained” narrative is a less satisfying literary experience than *Libra*, a novel that plays with the possibilities of imaginative fiction. This is not to suggest, of course, that literary fiction is always more aesthetically satisfying than literary nonfiction. Donald Pizer, however, argues that William Manchester’s “documentary novel” about the Kennedy assassination, *The Death of a President* (1967), “fails as successful art” because its “form is incapable of producing a significant theme” (1974: 213).

“conspiracy metanarrative” in which he becomes “a shadowy figure who lurks in the high window of a *book* depository, literally and figuratively surrounded by *texts*” (Keener 2001: 97, 103). As Stephen Baker comments, “in a sense, *Libra* is full of authors” (2000: 100). The metanarrative and “mirror plot” structure of *Libra* therefore places Oswald among those representations that have actually been produced after the event, but which in the fictional world of the novel are being produced at the moment. This makes Oswald himself a textualized character who cannot escape his fate as a created “patsy” in an all too complex conspiracy narrative. Oswald’s aim at self-construction and his serious belief in his own destiny is therefore constantly “deconstructed” by the fact that he is already being constructed by others. There is a cruel irony in that Oswald’s biography runs parallel to the former CIA agent Win Everett’s attempt at “devising a general shape, a life” and constructing “a fiction” or “a plot” about Oswald from various materials, or that “the life of Lee H. Oswald” and “the conspiracy to kill the president” are “two parallel lines” in the mind of the notorious David Ferrie (see DeLillo 1991 [1988]: 50, 221, 339). Here we have a fictional character (Everett) and a real one (Ferrie) constructing their plots concerning Oswald and the assassination on the same ontological level, which makes DeLillo’s combination of imagination and documentary extend fruitfully not only to the material but also to its narrative structuring.

I would argue that Mailer’s *Oswald’s Tale* is a representation of the actual world, whereas DeLillo’s *Libra* creates its “possible world”: “[T]he actual world is the realm of historical facts, possible worlds are the *branches* that history could take in the future” (Ryan 2001: 100; my emphasis).²³ Quite appropriately, DeLillo’s fictitious writer inside the novel is named “Branch.” In my view, DeLillo’s novel aims at playing with the possibilities of fiction, while Mailer’s book represents its version of nonfiction. This means that

²³ Some critics would probably argue that Stone’s *JFK* (which visualizes the Kennedy assassination as a huge conspiracy involving almost every possible or, indeed, impossible agency, government, or burlesque character) is an example of a creation of an “impossible world.” This is because “impossible worlds are the branches that history failed to take in the past” and they “cluster at the periphery of the [world] system,” based on illogical conclusions and destroying their “accessibility relation” to the actual world (see Ryan 2001: 100). As David Cowart puts it, DeLillo “insists on the distinction between embracing paranoia and representing it as historical reality,” and consequently “he dismisses Oliver Stone’s tendentious film *JFK* as ‘Disneyland for paranoids’” (2002: 223n). Mailer’s own stance towards *JFK* in his authorial reflections in *Oswald’s Tale* is more complicated: “While *JFK* satisfies our growing and gloomy sense that nine tenths of our freedom has been preempted by forces vastly greater than ourselves (and Stone’s hypothesis gives great power to the film), it does not come near to solving the immediate question: Did Lee Harvey Oswald kill JFK, and if he did, was he a lone gunman or a participant in a conspiracy?” (OT 606).

these texts “ask” to be read in different contexts, applying different conventions. What it does not mean, at least not directly, is that DeLillo’s discourse is “false” and that Mailer’s discourse is “truthful.” It may well prove, after years have passed, that DeLillo’s vision is closer to actual happenings (that there was a conspiracy of which Oswald was a part) than Mailer’s speculation based upon his pet theories (according to which Oswald was probably the sole “philosophical” assassin).²⁴ In fact, it appears that much contemporary speculation would bend more toward paranoid conspiracy “fiction,” partly influenced by the notorious but rhetorically powerful Oliver Stone film, whereas Mailer’s version is closely connected to the author’s less popular mystic existentialism and heroic poetics deriving in part from Emerson.²⁵ What still remains a fact is that in order to claim any truthfulness and accuracy for its version, Mailer’s narrative is obliged to use a large number of existing documents and show their materiality in the text through scrupulous notes and sources, while DeLillo is more “free” to merge his factual-based knowledge with his narrative imagination. In addition, while DeLillo does not make explicit his documentary sources (nor does he need to), Mailer does so: his book contains both notes and bibliography. And one of his references is as follows: “That, indeed, was the thesis of the CIA men in Don DeLillo’s fine novel *Libra*” (OT 779).

Oswald’s Character, Mailer’s Voice

The Implied Author in Nonfiction

Instead of connecting literary nonfiction to any direct reporting of the facts of the world, we need to take into account a more differentiated understanding of the writer’s relationship to his or her world, of the complexities of literary form, and of the readers’ responses to the author’s strategies (see

²⁴ Even conflicting versions and interpretations of the Kennedy assassination (like those of Mailer’s, DeLillo’s, or Stone’s) can be equally persuasive and plausible. As Eric Heyne suggests, referring to *Libra*, “it is not a matter of taking invention for fact, but rather of allowing a plausible blend of fact and invention to assume authoritative status in the absence of a superior competing version, or of allowing the analogic truth of fiction to supply a gap in the record of verifiable truth” (2001: 331).

²⁵ At the end of his narrative, Mailer quotes Emerson’s essay “Heroism” in order to figure Oswald’s motifs and impulses in his (possible) shooting of Kennedy (see OT 783). According to Richard Poirier, Mailer, as a “radical conservative,” is “the most conspicuous Emersonian of the present time” (1987: 169).

Furst 1992a: 21-22). There are always specific methods in the production of nonfiction and “such methods open up nonfiction to dynamic, resisting readings,” leading the reader “to examine [nonfiction] for what it reveals of its ritual of communication and of the cultural relationships among author, subject, and reader” (Lehman 1997: 74). The consideration of the role of the actual author in the nonfictional communication can highlight the specific features and problems of nonfiction and its reading which finally mark its difference from fiction. We may think of *The Executioner’s Song*, a book whose idiosyncratic prose style has been both analyzed and appreciated in its relation to the “career-author” constructed by Mailer’s other works. On the other hand, in *The Armies of the Night*, for example, the rhetorical richness is also associated, more directly, to Mailer’s visible authorial position. The writer of nonfiction can, according to Lehman, be implied in his text in two ways, either through the narrative voice (which is usually connected with the actual author and his or her ‘ideology’) or through the idea and information that the reader holds about the author (including the question of what kind of narrative voice and position the author has taken and whether this voice possibly differs from the author’s “own voice”).

As discussed in Chapter II, a refined notion of the implied author may shed light on the procedures of nonfiction. Speaking of a nonstandard case of unreliability in nonfictional narrative (*Angela’s Ashes*), Phelan suggests that “the figure of the implied author is crucial to the ethical dimension of the narrative” (2005: 69). Literary narratives, fictional and nonfictional alike, are combinations of complex rhetorical effects which provoke complex emotional and ethical responses. While there is virtually no evaluative or perceptual difference between the narrator and the implied author in much nonfiction (see *ibid.*: 134), we should still be able to construct the image of the implied author as an author’s textual or “second” version, someone or something which represents at least some of the real author’s capacities, beliefs, and values. Thus, when speaking of Mailer’s ethics and aesthetics in *Oswald’s Tale*, we are at the same time speaking of the values and capacities of the *implied author* of the narrative. William Nelles suggests that “the fact that an implied author has constructed a certain type of narrative, told by a certain type of narrator and within which certain things happen to certain types of characters, gives the implied reader plenty of evidence for assigning ethical principles and norms to the implied author” (1997: 52). Instead of “collapsing” actual readers into ideal ones, who are likely to accept the structures and values of the text, recent nonfiction criticism grants greater power to active, resistant, dialectical, reflexive, and rhetorical reading practices. In our “reflexive” reading we are likely to search

for the ways in which the (implied) author has “shaped” his or her text, and consequently we may question this author’s form and vision, sometimes even more so when we are aware that we are reading nonfiction rather than fiction. As Lehman argues, it is crucial to examine “the way that writers of nonfiction implicate themselves within the text, how their narrative presence reveals the ideology of their projects” (1997: 38). Lehman claims that in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Wolfe’s authorial presence “hovers” over the book, communicating the author’s own ideology behind his seemingly objective reporter role and producing sometimes questionable representations of such public figures as Ken Kesey. Similarly, our knowledge that Mailer is telling about actual events and real people in *Oswald’s Tale* makes us scrutinize the ethical dimensions of his rhetoric and voice in a more “direct” and “serious” way than if we were reading fiction.

Of course, readers may face some specific problems when realizing that they are the authorial audience of the work of Norman Mailer, arguably the most visible and voluble major American writer after the Second World War. In the long course of his narrative about Oswald, Mailer (as the implied author) asks for our time and attention (our “friendship” in the Boothian terminology). In this sense, “the author gains by having an audience, and the audience gains by attending to the author’s narrative” (Phelan 2005: 143). In *Oswald’s Tale* Mailer is typically present through his absence, only referred to as “the author” or “The Interviewer.” But even in *The Executioner’s Song*, a book famous for its authorial detachment and invisibility, we may see how the silent author is still always there through his choices and selections, his tropes and motifs, his themes and myths. This is probably a problem that somewhat blinds the general critical appreciation of Mailer’s most distinguished works (like *Executioner*): the “career-author,” to use Booth’s terminology, is too well-known and notorious to be purely *implied* in his texts. In *Oswald’s Tale*, Mailer’s “presence” is somewhat more visible than in *The Executioner’s Song*, even though “Norman Mailer” is only mentioned twice in this narrative, the first time as one of the interviewers (OT 403), and the second time indirectly (and self-ironically) as physically resembling KGB agent (OT 405).²⁶ Nevertheless, Mailer’s *voice* is behind this aesthetic organization, ‘voice’ being rhetorically understood as “the fusion of style, tone, and values” (Phelan 1996: 45). In *Oswald’s*

²⁶ According to one critic, *Oswald’s Tale* represents “considerable literary sacrifice,” because in its “flat, almost transcribed, barely third-person style” “there is no room for the loud flourishes of [Mailer’s] own voice and personality” (Mallon 2001: 311).

Tale Mailer is thus both “The Interviewer” and a visible source of a rhetoric which expects a favorable response from his audience.

In some documentary books the actual narrative text, which contains the story and its representation, is framed by a non-narrative paratext, usually either a “Foreword,” “Afterword” or “Author’s Note.” The author’s words before or after the narrative usually constitute an important context for the narrative, containing (possibly) the author’s explicit “truth-claim” about the text’s factuality and validity and his or her presentation of the sources, materials, and references used in the narrative. The tone of discourse in these parts of the book is bound to be “non-narrative” as opposed to the story-telling of the main contents of the text. However, even in the narrative text not all sentences can be regarded as “narrative.” In *Oswald’s Tale*, the “Note from the Author” almost strikingly breaks the narrative in a culmination point, where Oswald attempts to move back to America from Russia. In these kinds of explicit, non-narrative comments the reader may find the author’s intentional and visible, more or less ideological meanings. As Mieke Bal remarks, “[t]he argumentative parts of the text often give explicit information about the ideology of a text” (1997: 34). In nonfiction, this oscillation between non-narrative rhetoric and the purer storytelling is in many cases visible and produces a sense of “uneven” textuality and, possibly, lack of coherence, often considered aesthetic flaws in fiction. Still, it is this *non-fictional* rhetoric which gives its complex stamp to the Mailerian nonfiction.

When Mailer suddenly halts his narrative about Oswald at the beginning of Volume Two and tries to position himself as the author, he also adopts the role of “a literary usher,” a self-conscious constructor of the book who attempts to put the material in the right place. He even gives the illusion that there is little intervention on the part of novelist Mailer, thus providing a possible self-critique of his own narrative: “Indeed, there are a number of chapters in this second volume when there will be no more demand on the author than to serve as a literary usher who is there to guide each transcript to its proper placement on the page” (OT 352).²⁷ We may recall that the frequent use of “one” to indicate the author-narrator is actually a typical device of Mailer’s in his search for the reader-audience’s answer; one’s position thus does not mean only the author-narrator’s position and viewpoint, but

²⁷ Not surprisingly, this kind of self-reflection, which almost amounts to self-critique or self-negation, has met with harsh criticism (see Powers 1995: 33; Keener 2001: 106n; Mallon 2001: 312). When reflecting upon his constant excursions into various side routes and subplots, Mailer maintains that “no literary vice is more damnable in a writer than needlessly irritating the reader” (OT 623).

also that of the reader-audience.²⁸ In *Oswald's Tale*, Mailer's own narrative voice and rhetoric seek to persuade the reader to accept *his* vision of Oswald. Here we are at the core of the rhetorical theory of narrative, according to which readers always take different positions when reading narrative texts, partly joining the narrative audience, partly the authorial audience, and while always remaining flesh-and-blood readers, still able to "move" into the positions of these textual audiences. In Phelan's words:

Even as we participate in the authorial and narrative audiences, we never lose our identities as flesh-and-blood readers, and that fact adds a further layer to our experience. Just as the authorial audience evaluates the narrator's values, so too does the flesh-and-blood audience evaluate the author's. Entering the authorial audience allows us to recognize the ethical and ideological bases of the author's invitations. Comparing those values to the ones we bring to the text leads us into a dialogue about those values. (1996: 100)

What makes *Oswald's Tale* a somewhat problematic case as rhetorical (and nonfictional) communication must be related to its explicit reader-addressing rhetoric. As the subtitle of the book suggests, the story of Oswald is *An American Mystery*, and, as discussed above, the author-narrator invites his audience to join in the solving of it: "We, author and reader, are in collaboration to explore a mystery, our own largest American mystery." Should we understand, then, the implied (and ideal) audience of the narrative as *American*? And does this exclude *me* as a reader of Mailer's work? Here we should, however, distinguish between (1) the narrative audience and (2) the *ideal* narrative audience – the latter being the audience for which the narrator *wishes* he were speaking or writing (see Phelan 1996: 140). There is no sense in arguing that the *authorial* audience of the book is purely American. The "implied" reader of Mailer's book may be anyone who attempts to understand its structural, rhetorical, ethical, and ideological features; thus, any reader can be included in this textual communication, if he or she wants to be.²⁹ In addition, there is no absolute need to accept the invitation of the authorial voice, to join in the exploration of this mystery, because the reader, American or not, may feel that *this* mystery cannot be solved.

²⁸ As noted in my chapter on *The Armies of the Night*, the use of "one" is a typically rhetorical device in Mailer's nonfiction, frequently disguising a reference to "I" or "you." It often also occurs in passages of free indirect discourse. See Fludernik (2001: 109); Phelan (2005: 117n).

²⁹ As Kearns notes, when a narrator directly addresses a narratee, the actual reader can choose to stand outside this communication, basing his choice on his determination of the narrative's "constructive intention." Therefore, the reader may ask, "In order to be the best possible reader of this work, where should I place myself with respect to this narrator and this narratee?" (1999: 43).

Mailer's voice states every now and then what this narrative aims to do: "[t]his narrative is an exploration into the possibilities of his [Oswald's] character rather than a conviction that one holds the solution" (OT 513). The voice also admits: "It is possible that the working hypothesis has become more important to the author than trying to discover the truth" (OT 606). The very case of Oswald, with its ambiguities, mysteries, and conflicting interpretations, provides fruitful soil for Mailer's version of nonfiction, which never takes existing facts and documents as simply truthful explanations of "mysteries." On this basis, we hear the authorial voice explaining that "evidence, by itself, will never provide the answer to a mystery" and the same voice suggesting that "it will be obvious to the reader that *one* does not (and should not) respect evidence with the religious intensity that *others* bring to it" (OT 775; my emphases). Once again, the use of "one" implies not only the author, but also the reader, or at least the author's attempt to address his presumably engaged reader(s) in order to construct a conflict with "others." ("Others" here signify, apparently, those believing in hard facts which explain everything.) According to the author-narrator's authorial (but not authoritative) voice, Oswald had "the character to kill Kennedy," and the reader should contemplate that possibility: "If one misperceives his character on this point, then one has misunderstood him entirely" (OT 778). Is this "one" the author himself, reflecting on his own attempts and difficulties in interpreting and understanding, or is it, once again, the author and the reader sharing the same position?

Although it has been "scientifically" explained that Kennedy was shot from different angles, Mailer is not interested in this theory because it has nothing to do with the specific "aim" of his narrative: "[O]ne is certainly not going to enter the near-impenetrable controversy in acoustics that would prove or disprove whether a fourth shot was fired from the grassy knoll – delineation of character, not exposition of soundwave charts, is *the aim of this work!*" (OT 778-79; my emphasis). Mailer actually reflects that "the approach of this work is not legal, technical, or evidentiary but *novelistic* – that is, we are trying to understand Oswald" (OT 682; my emphasis). This may serve as an example of Mailer's way of producing nonfiction which is always constructed more on authorial speculations and interpretations than on independent factual evidence, which never makes a narrative or plot by itself.³⁰ Finally, Mailer's speculative "solution" to the mystery of Oswald

³⁰ Mailer's way of constructing nonfictional narrative can be contrasted with, for example, Dinesh D'Souza's style of proposing a strict connection between fact, interpretation, and narrative in his nonfictional *Illiberal Education* (see Phelan 1996: 158). Mailer even contemplates "the fact that there are no facts – only the mode of our approach to what we call facts" (OT 516).

does not come directly from any documents; it comes from more imaginative sources, which can sometimes be expected to provide unexpected routes to the mysterious “truth.”³¹

Instead of conceiving of Oswald as a trivial or absurd character in the middle of tragic events, Mailer makes him “a protagonist, a prime mover, a man who made things happen – in short, a figure larger than others would credit him for being” (OT 605). Mailer, then, is not willing to see Oswald as “a petty figure, a lone twisted pathetic killer who happened to be in a position to kill a potentially great President” (OT 606). As Mailer puts it, Oswald “has continued to exist among us as a barely visible protagonist in a set of opposed scenarios,” and there have been endless attempts to fit him “into one or another species of plot” (OT 197). Rather, it seems that Mailer views Oswald as an individualist and a visionary, an intelligent if troubled young man who had a dream of a new political world; therefore, “if we should decide that Oswald killed Kennedy by himself, let us at least try to comprehend whether he was an assassin with a vision or a killer without one” (OT 198). As Mailer’s persuasive rhetoric goes, “if a figure as large as Kennedy is cheated abruptly of his life, we feel better, inexplicably better, if his killer is also not without size” (OT 607). This is the vision that belongs to Mailer’s novelistic approach. In an aesthetically reflexive but ethically problematic way, *Oswald’s Tale* needs an individual protagonist at its center, not an absurd “zero” or “patsy” who would only confirm the ultimate absurdity of reality itself.

Mimetic, Thematic, and Synthetic Components of the Narrative

The chapter “Remarks from the Author” in *Oswald’s Tale* foregrounds the devices and methods of the narrative and discusses the way in which its protagonist is perceived:

This is, after all, a book that depends upon the small revelation of separate points of view. We are, in effect, studying an *object* (to use the KGB’s word for a person under scrutiny) as he tumbles through the prisms of a kaleidoscope. It is as if by such means we hope to penetrate into the psychology of Lee Harvey Oswald. (OT 197)

³¹ A similar notion can be found in *Libra*: “There is always another level, another secret, a way in which the heart breeds a deception so mysterious and complex it can only be taken for a deeper kind of truth” (DeLillo 1991 [1988]: 260).

Mailer emphasizes the artificial and synthetic nature of his narrative, thus also linking the book to his own kind of self-conscious nonfiction. As in the case of Marilyn Monroe in *Marilyn*, Mailer now sees Lee Harvey Oswald as a kind of mysterious double peak, claiming that “we are dealing” “with the greatest mountain of mystery in the twentieth century” (OT 349). Like Marilyn, this kind of complex and mysterious person needs to be approached through both documentary evidence and novelistic speculation, and thus the narrative text proceeds to create a form of its own between fiction and nonfiction. Mailer suggests that Marilyn’s elusive and contradictory character opens “an entire problem of biography” (M 18); as for Oswald, it has been suggested that as a biographical subject he is unique, “the central figure in a narrative with no center” (Keener 2001: 67). In Mailer’s words, as an object of endless representations Oswald has become a “barely visible protagonist,” but it is a part of Mailer’s strategy in *Oswald’s Tale* to put his main character in the centre of the narrative.³²

From a rhetorical viewpoint, we can consider how Mailer makes the character Oswald function on different levels, levels on which the reader him- or herself also takes potential positions as the text’s audience. According to Phelan, a character consists of three components: the *mimetic* (character as person), the *thematic* (character as idea), and the *synthetic* (character as artificial construct) (see 1996: 29; see also Phelan 1989: 2-3; 2005: 12-13). Phelan argues that Virginia Woolf’s characters invite “a very strong mimetic involvement with them and their visions of the world,” but still “this mimetic involvement is itself complicated by the way in which Woolf’s technique makes us aware of the synthetic component of the characters and by the way the progression makes us respond to them thematically” (1996: 40). We could maintain that as a mimetic character Lee Harvey Oswald appears to us as a human being in history, a young man whose misfortunes and uneasy adventures almost claim our sympathy. As a Finnish reader, I may feel some excitement as Oswald’s diary begins to unfold as an embedded narrative with this opening remark: “October 16, 1959. Arrive from Helsinki by train; am met by Intourist Representative and taken in car to Hotel Berlin” (OT 41).³³ As members of the narrative audience, we adopt the position of

³² It is both interesting and ironic that Mailer’s book reinforces the same biographical narrative of Oswald as the one established in the Warren Commission reports which actually contain a section titled “Biography of Lee Harvey Oswald.” John Keener notes that while “Mailer begins with the *man* rather than the *event*,” he is not bound up by the conventions of objective biography, for “structurally, the book is epic” (2001: 75).

³³ Oswald’s diary is, actually, titled “Historic Diary,” and it “might be viewed as a nominal attempt to historicize his own life by inscribing himself as a biographical subject” (Keener 2001: 80). Mailer makes quite frequent reference to Oswald’s diary, con-

excitement, anxiety, and anticipation as we follow Oswald's journey from Minsk to Dallas. On this level, we accept the narrator's presentation as "reality," and may think of characters as human beings like ourselves.

On another level, Oswald can be interpreted as a character who fulfills a thematic function. This means that the author-narrator wants his character to carry some larger idea and meaning which apparently reflects the whole of the narrative. Mailer does not want to be totalizing, so as not "to put a *thematic stamp* on him [Oswald]" (OT 353; my emphasis). Nevertheless, through our interpretive attempts, we search for prevailing themes in this narrative, and we may find those themes to be conspicuously Mailerian. Could it be, then, that Mailer wants his Oswald to stand for romantic individualism, creative violence, anti-totalitarian rebellion, transcendentalist heroism, the lost innocence of youth, or the lost innocence of America? Our reading experience merges with our attempts at interpretation. This audience position is more demanding than simply joining the narrative audience which can merely indulge in following Oswald's tale as presented as a relatively suspenseful *fabula*. However, not only is Mailer's Oswald a mimetic and thematic construct, but he also becomes a synthetic component of the narrative. In Phelan's words, "we respond to the characters as human agents, as representing some ideas, beliefs, or values, and as artificial constructs playing particular roles in the larger construct that is the whole work" (1996: 91). When we speak of the synthetic nature of the character, we come to the core of the "peculiarity" of Mailer's nonfictional poetics – "peculiar" being the concept by which Mailer defines the specific "nonfictionality" of *Oswald's Tale*. The use of the character as a synthetic component is a sign of a text's self-conscious artificiality, its way of mirroring its own devices and conventions. In order to function effectively, this component must tell us something about the ways in which "this" book was made and what its intentions are. In fact, this kind of character function and its use as a metaphorical model for the narrative structure is Mailer's idiosyncratic convention, most visibly and effectively used in those narratives where this character is called "Norman Mailer." As seen in Chapter III, this is how Mailer uses "himself" in *The Armies of the Night*, a book which serves as a telling example of "the irreducibly synthetic component of character even in nonfiction narrative" (Phelan 1989: 191). In another context, when dis-

structing it as one of his embedded narratives, as it were. Other "subtexts" in this sense are, obviously, the Warren Commission reports, and, in addition, Gerald Posner's book *Case Closed* and Patricia McMillan's *Marina and Lee*. Mailer's extensive quotation from these sources is symptomatically reflected in authorial remarks such as "from this point on, we will be using citations from *Marina and Lee* more than any other source but the Warren Commission" (OT 419).

cusssing *Angela's Ashes*, Phelan argues that McCourt uses his younger self "Frankie" in a strongly mimetic way, simultaneously calling attention to the narrative's synthetic component, so that "McCourt is obviously constructing Frankie to serve certain purposes" (2005: 72). Similarly, while Norman Mailer is a mimetic character in *Armies*, and carries some prevailing themes of the narrative (absurdity, ambiguity, craziness, the comedy and tragedy of history), he is also a synthetic component of the narrative, a "tool" and "vehicle" which the author-narrator uses in order to emphasize the subjective and always partial truths of historical experience.

In a somewhat analogous way, Lee Harvey Oswald is constructed as a synthetic character in *Oswald's Tale*. As mentioned above, Mailer analyzes the methods and intentions of his work in the chapter entitled "On Becoming an Usher," which gives the reader an image of the author as constructing this work (as if at the moment), selecting his facts and documents, and trying to find correct routes to the mystery of Oswald. Oswald's ambivalent character is something "we" (the author and the reader) must "penetrate," just as we have to climb "the ego-kingdom of mansions, palaces, and consummately ugly high-rises" (OT 353). Finally, the metaphor of climbing and searching, instead of only explaining, becomes the method of the work, and Mailer shows his distrust of a purely factual account: "To approach Oswald, we must deal with metaphor as often as with fact" (OT 353). While "Mystery" also figures in the subtitle of the book, mysteriousness is a kind of tool for Mailer in his study of Oswald: "He [Oswald] is a man we can never understand with comfort, yet the small mysteries surrounding him give resonance to our comprehension" (OT 539). From the viewpoint of rhetorical theory, we may see how Mailer's implied voice and intention in the narrative is constantly addressed toward his reader-audience, whom the author-narrator tries to imply in the discussion about Oswald: "*One* must always read accounts of Oswald's behavior with *double vision*" (OT 379; my emphases). To read with a "double vision" is probably Mailer's version of a "reflexive" reading; but to read in a reflexive way also means taking a complex, dialogic, and potentially resisting stance toward the authorial voice.

A kind of mimetic involvement with people and their lives is what makes the first part of *Oswald's Tale*, entitled "Oswald in Minsk with Marina," function as more like a novelistic narrative than the second part of the book, "Oswald in America," which leans heavily on documentary material.³⁴ This

³⁴ There is a large documentary foundation for the first part as well, put together by Mailer and his colleague Lawrence Schiller (familiar to us via *The Executioner's Song*) on the basis of their interviews with people in Minsk. At the very beginning of Volume Two the author tells us that "one stimulus of the writing of this book was an offer from

structural (and in a sense ideological) division may remind the reader of the “Western Voices/Eastern Voices” distinction in *The Executioner’s Song*. In fact, as various critics have noted, the actual achievement of *Oswald’s Tale* is in the first rather than the second part (see, e.g., Dearborn 1999: 418). According to John Keener, by virtue of its absolute freshness, the material of “Oswald in Minsk with Marina” is fascinating and reads like a series of miniature biographies of its interviewees. The first part of the book is an “exercise of focalization,” providing a sense of Oswald as seen through Russian eyes and described through Russian voices, so that the result is a kind of “polyphonic narrative” surrounding the silent and enigmatic character of Oswald himself (see Keener 2001: 75-76). Still, it is implied that what we may call the “synthetic” character of Volume Two grows out of the more “mimetic” one of Volume One (see OT 350).³⁵ By adding some “Russian flavor to the prose” through grammatical modifications in his English, Mailer begins his long narrative in the Russian context, vividly picturing the post-war era before Oswald’s coming to Minsk.³⁶ We may recall the beginning of *The Executioner’s Song*, reflecting a childhood memory of Gary Gilmore’s cousin: “Brenda was six when she fell out of the apple tree” (ES 5). *Oswald’s Tale* accordingly opens with a scene from the childhood of Marina Oswald’s aunt, simultaneously introducing the reader/audience to the narrative style of the first part of the book:

When Valya was three years old, she fell on a hot stove and burned her face and was ill for a whole year, all that year from three to four. Her mother died soon after, and her father was left with seven children.

When they buried her mother, Valya’s father said, “Now, look at her and remember her.” He put them all around the coffin and told them again, “Try to remember your mother.” There they were, all seven children, dressed in black. Valya’s dress had an ornament like a small cross. She remembers that, and how all her brothers and sisters cried. Their mother had died giving birth to her eighth baby. (OT 5)

the Belarus KGB to allow a look into their files on Oswald” (OT 349). As for the facts of Oswald’s life, this Russian material is completely original; indeed “Mailer’s original intention had been to publish the Minsk volume separately: ‘I started with one book and ended with another’” (see Keener 2001: 106n).

³⁵ A similar kind of narrative progression informs *Executioner* – in its movement from the “realistic” Book One to the “metadocumentary” Book Two – or *Armies*, where the fact that the narrative is taking its direction from a character’s mimetic function in Book One actually foregrounds the synthetic component of the character in Book Two (cf. Phelan 1989: 191, 197).

³⁶ In *Oswald’s Tale* Mailer creates, in the opinion of one critic, “a kind of Mailer-patent Russian-English that captures Russian rhythms not only of language but also of thinking and feeling” (Powers 1995: 32). According to a related view, Mailer uses a language and a prose rhythm “evocative of his elusive subject,” succeeding “constantly to echo Russian locutions” (Coward 2002: 92).

While the beginning of *Executioner* offers clear scope for thematic interpretation (concerning the fall from Eden), the opening of *Oswald* may feel less motivated, unless we read it as a reflection of death, loss, and remembrance, themes which recur at the end of the narrative. In any case, from its very beginning, Mailer's story of Gary Gilmore is more "poetic" compared to the more "documentary" story of Lee Harvey Oswald, also marking (to my mind) an *aesthetic* distinction between these books.

Inside the limitations of his narrative method and mythological interpretive framework Mailer still aims, in the role and position of the researcher and interviewer, at going, if at all possible, to the core of people's feelings and memories. The presentation of a human character is a crucial part of the reader's experience of literary narratives, and more often than not it is the human character who elicits the most emotional responses in the reader. *Oswald's Tale*, in spite of its scrupulous documentation and authorial speculations, emerges as an emotional and empathic narrative, while it may also appear to be an ethically problematic one. It may be argued that in literary communication the implied relationship with the *other person* is, in the fullest sense, a matter of ethics (cf. Sell 2000: 59). As Gibson defines it, on the basis of Levinas's philosophy, the ethical relation brings with it the burden of responsibility to the other. According to Gibson, we have to recognize fiction's ethical dimension outside its mimetic project. This means that "ethics always appears in a relation between two planes: the plane on which representation takes place [e.g., the level of narration]; and the plane of the represented" (1999: 54). This is a crucial notion, and yet I would contend that its importance is specially highlighted in application to *nonfictional* communication, where the "represented" (the characters) are not fictional constructs created by the author (as in *Heart of Darkness*, the novel discussed by Gibson).³⁷ This is to say that the complex rhetorical effects of

³⁷ The crucial ethical difference as regards the representation of "people" in nonfiction as opposed to fiction can be considered through my example above, concerning the question who actually shot President Kennedy. In DeLillo's version in *Libra*, the actual shot comes from the grassy knoll and is fired by a professional Cuban rifleman called Raymo (later identified by Branch as one Ramón Benítez): "He held on Kennedy's head. [...] He got off the shot. The man's hair stood up. It just rippled and flew" (1991 [1988]: 402). If this "Raymo" were an actual, historical character, what would be the ethical consequences of DeLillo's vision that he was the man pulling the trigger? In fact, some readers may feel that DeLillo's "framing" of *Oswald* as the one who shot the first bullets (wounding both Kennedy and Governor Connally) carries some ethical problems as well. Still, we need to reflect upon the author's explicit note that this is a work of imaginative fiction. Apparently, Mailer's speculation that perhaps Oswald was the assassin working alone can be ethically responded to and even resisted by the reader. However, here the problem of ethics is not on the level of narrative *representation*, because Mailer does not "show" anything like this (Oswald shooting Kennedy) on the mimetic level, as DeLillo does.

Mailer's narrative about Oswald and people belonging to his life raise and provoke complex emotional and ethical responses in the reader, even opening the narrative to a kind of "resisting reading."³⁸

In Lehman's words, "a nonfictional narrative is always in contest with the material lives that it cannot quite contain" (1997: 75), and "nonfictional characters, if still living, will often remember stories differently and might wrestle with writers over claims, facts, and interpretations" (2001: 338). Because it concerns a tragedy that involves many people, both Russian and American, Mailer's narrative foregrounds personal viewpoints and memories, even personal pain. The subjective feelings of real-life characters are embedded in the narrative on the basis of actual interviews and realized through such devices as focalization and free indirect discourse. In this way, the narrative technique (just like the actual literary production and transformation of documentary archives) comes close to that of *The Executioner's Song*, even though (as I would argue) *Oswald's Tale* does not match the artistic organization of Mailer's masterpiece. Thus, as a conclusion, we may ponder in which way narrative technique may carry ethical powers and problems and how, in the rhetoric of nonfiction, ethics and aesthetics may be interconnected. In *Oswald*, when we hear the words spoken by the real-life characters, we know that there is pain that even time cannot heal. For example, early in the narrative there is the narrativized and focalized interview of Sasha Piskalev, "Sasha, who was wonderful in every way and therefore not for her [Marina]," as DeLillo writes (1991 [1988]: 201). Sasha lost his love, Marina, to a stranger, an American called Lee Harvey Oswald, as he now tells Mailer and Schiller: "As they say in Minsk, 'There was a black cat running between us.' [...] His life, and his dreams, vanished. Even now, it is painful. He waves his hand gently, as if the residue of this old sorrow, more than thirty years old, could overflow again. [...] She was still in his heart" (OT 30). This paragraph serves as an example of an interaction and communication happening on the story level, for the interviewees meet the real-life characters of Oswald's story thirty years after the actual events and discuss the possible truths and falsities of that story.

Still, it seems that "underneath all of this, [...] was an undertext, a *sub-text*" (OT 336; my emphasis). Occasionally we are told that when listening

³⁸ We may recall Judith Fetterley's "resisting reading" of Mailer and other American male writers (see Chapter II). Wayne Booth makes a more rhetorically complex distinction between *reading-with*, which is "the reading we do when we simply accept what seem to us the obvious demands of the text," and *reading-against*, in which the reader "sets out to find out in the text whatever it does *not* promise or invite to, whatever its author presumably never intended but unconsciously either allowed in or specifically banned" (1994: 102-04).

to sometimes fictional, sometimes factual stories “the interviewers were puzzled” (OT 336), and this feeling potentially reflects the reader’s position as well. In these sections the invisible historical author-narrator becomes more visible, providing subjective “lenses” through which we (as the audience) can perceive the scene and perhaps share his (“Mailer’s”) empathy with the people who have suffered (cf. Phelan 2001: 57-58). The reader’s sympathy may be engaged by reading the thoughts of others and by building a close textual identification with their hopes, dreams, and fears, but when reading nonfiction the reader may also experience those characters (who live outside the text as well) as more complex, perhaps more alien, because their actual reality remains elusive (see Lehman 1997: 121). Through rhetorical effects, Mailer’s narrative turns its readers into participants in the mystery of history and seems to require from them both emotional and ethical response. The apparent climax (and the most painful case) in the rhetorical interviewer-character communication is Mailer’s and Schiller’s actual meeting of Oswald’s wife Marina in Texas in 1993, and Marina’s reflection upon that meeting, since “the thought that there would be *one more book* about Lee and herself was painful in the extreme” (OT 775; my emphasis).³⁹ While Marina “did not want to talk about the past,” she still would declare that she now believed Lee was innocent or at least part of a conspiracy:

But, she would say, he was not a man who fired the gun. Since evidence is a blur to her, she soon will say that she cannot be certain what she believes. If only she knew whether he did it or not. What a great weight would be lifted from June and Rachel [the children] if he did not commit the deed. *What do you think? she asks. We are trying to find out, say the interviewers.* (OT 775; my emphasis)

In Mailer’s narrative the roles of the narrator and character – or the *interviewer* and *interviewee*, if we emphasize the original communicative context – are not clearly separated. Here the character (Marina) becomes, for a short time, a centre of consciousness, a *reflector*, who provides one subjective perspective on the complex story about Oswald. The narrative, however, also gives *the reader* a feeling that he or she is perceiving the events “through the eyes and mind of the reflector-character” (Stanzel 1984 [1979]: 144, 147). Partly on the basis of Stanzel’s terminology, Fludernik proposes “a model of the reading process in which the reader takes an internal position with regard to the represented events, as if she were a witness

³⁹ At the end of *Oswald’s Tale* Mailer notes that special acknowledgments are due “to Marina Oswald Porter, for subjecting herself to the pain of being interviewed for five consecutive days in Dallas and for her honesty, which was so notably severe upon herself that it kept her searching through many an old laceration to locate a shard of truth” (OT, “Acknowledgments”: xx).

rather than a mere camera eye" (1996: 201). In my view, *Oswald's Tale* (like *The Executioner's Song*) represents a narrative mode which makes it possible for the reader to empathize with the reflector-character whose own voice emerges through the narrator's presentation.⁴⁰

Obviously, Mailer is constructing thematic and synthetic portraits not only of Oswald himself but of characters like his mother and wife. Just as the opening scene of *Oswald's Tale* alludes to the beginning of *The Executioner's Song*, the ending of *Oswald* is reminiscent of that of *Executioner*. Mailer opens his narrative, in both cases, with a scene where a woman is a child, while both stories end with an image of a woman as a mother at the end of her life, still living after her son's "execution." Here we may see allusions to Christian imagery, which is made explicit at the end of DeLillo's *Libra* as Marguerite Oswald feels the passion of "Mary mother of Jesus" (1991 [1988]: 453). While Gilmore's mother Bessie continues her life in her "plastic" trailer, defending the courage of her son ("Let them come" [ES 1049]), Oswald's mother Marguerite is imagined in "Heaven" telling the story of her son to the angels.⁴¹ Whereas the female characters remain extremely real, mimetic, and human in *The Executioner's Song*, in *Oswald's Tale*, at least on its last pages, Mailer apparently feels obliged to give the women of this narrative more abstract and romantic dimensions.⁴² Thus the final image of Marina Oswald signifies a characteristically

⁴⁰ Sylvia Adamson in fact suggests that the concept of "empathetic narrative" resembles free indirect discourse. She also argues that empathetic narrative became the site of a genre innovation in the New Journalism and other nonfiction where the events were being "focalized on the narratee instead of on the narrator" (2001: 85). Not accidentally, one of Adamson's examples is Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*. Apparently, free indirect discourse functions differently in every literary text which employs it, and therefore we may see Flaubert constructing narratorial *irony* toward and distance from the characters in *Madame Bovary*, while Woolf creates narratorial *empathy* toward the characters in *Mrs. Dalloway*, eliciting a more engaged reader response (see Mezei 1996: 69). Consequently, different writers draw on the potential of FID to create sympathy or antipathy for their characters (see Cohn 1999: 180). *The Executioner's Song* can be seen as an example of a 'true life novel' pursuing "the greatest challenge of any novel: the writer's empathetic identification with people very different from himself" (Dickstein 2002: 160). This kind of empathetic identification constructs some of the most "novelistic" parts in *Oswald's Tale* as well.

⁴¹ A more biographically or psychoanalytically oriented literary theorist – and there have been many – would probably stress here Norman Mailer's own psychological self-image reflected in Gary Gilmore and Lee Harvey Oswald. As we may know, "[t]he most significant influence in [Mailer's] early years was that of his mother, by all accounts a dominating personality who believed fiercely in her son's abilities" (Glenday 1995: 4).

⁴² Phelan suggests that one reason why McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* is both aesthetically and ethically more successful than its sequel, *'Tis*, is due to the author-narrator's handling of his female characters: in *'Tis*, the figure of Alberta is a romantic stereotype, an abstraction rather than a fully mimetic character. As Phelan argues, "the ethical and the aesthetic

Mailerian transformation of her from a real character to a transcendental figure. At the same time, as in *Marilyn*, Mailer seems to lift his own narrative from documentary realism to the realm of romantic myth:

She sits in a chair, a tiny woman in her early fifties, her thin shoulders hunched forward in such pain of spirit under such a mass of guilt that one would comfort her as one would hug a child. What is left of what was once her beauty are her extraordinary eyes, blue as diamonds, and they blaze with light as if, in divine compensation for the dead weight of all that will not cease to haunt her, she has been granted a spark from the hour of an apocalypse others have not seen. Perhaps it is the light offered to victims who have suffered like the gods. (OT 788)

The ending of the narrative of *Oswald's Tale* marks the high point of its romantic transcendentalism and its authorial rhetoric. As noted above, on these final pages of Oswald's story, the mournful mother Marguerite uses her narrative powers and tells the history of her infamous son. We may note that DeLillo's *Libra* also gives Marguerite a position of an embedded narrator in a narrative dominated by male conspirators who make their "fictions" out of her son. In a way she reflects DeLillo's authorial position as a storyteller navigating in the middle of scattered story materials: "Your honor, I cannot state the truth of this case with simple yes or no. I have to tell a story. [...] Listen to me" (DeLillo 1991 [1988]: 449). She obviously succeeds, at least in some parts of the Warren Commission reports, as her rhetoric makes the listeners ask "the rapt audience's perpetual question": "MR. RANKIN: And then what happened?" (OT 720; cf. Phelan 1996: 6). In fact, the self-reflexive motto of Mailer's book comes from Marguerite's answer to the Warren Commission: "I cannot make it [the story] brief. I will say I am unable to make it brief. This is my life and my son's life going down in history" (OT 789).⁴³ Marguerite's statements before the commission – both in Mailer and DeLillo – result in a considerable rhetorical effect, as she addresses her audience by emphasizing the complexity of truth (there is no "simple yes or no"), retaining her faith in her own capacity as a reliable teller who should be listened to ("listen to me"). And still, it is "my life and

are inextricably interwoven," and *Angela's Ashes* is "a better book because McCourt has succeeded in matching his technique with his ethical vision" (2005: 97). This is akin to my own evaluative juxtaposition of *The Executioner's Song* and *Oswald's Tale* and my view of, especially, Nicole Baker as more successfully portrayed than the women characters of the latter work.

⁴³ As suggested in Chapter II, this kind of self-conscious comment on the narrative's length functions simultaneously on the level of the story – characters or narrator-protagonists, like Harry Hubbard in *Harlot's Ghost*, believe in the ontological meaning of the narrative's continuation, for their lives depend on it – as well as on the level of authorial reflection, as the author's indirect attempts to explain the great bulk of his book.

my son's life going down in history," in that order, suggesting an egotistic personality who tries to persuade the audience and claim her own place in the annals.

At the end of Mailer's story, Marguerite Oswald has become a thematic and synthetic character rather than a mimetic one, almost turning into a metonymic figure of novelistic writing and authorial position:

Yet, *she is worthy of Dickens*. Marguerite Oswald can stand for literary office with Micawber and Uriah Heep. No word she utters will be false to her character; her stamp will be on every phrase. *Few people without a literary motive would seek her company for long, but a novelist can esteem Marguerite*. She does all his work for him. (OT 790; my emphases)

This paragraph also functions as an allusion to the end of *Marilyn*, in which the author-narrator believes that Charles Dickens will meet Marilyn in heaven since he, "like many another literary man, is bound to adore you, fatherless child" (M 248). Mailer's reflection that "few people without a literary motive would seek her company for long, but a novelist can esteem Marguerite" may anticipate that few literary critics without a theoretical motive would seek *his* company for long, but the present writer can esteem Mailer. I believe that the imaginative transcendence at the end of *Oswald's Tale* is meant, by the self-reflexivity and rhetoric characteristic of its author, to persuade the reader of yet another reflection: Mailer is worthy of Dickens.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the *poetics of nonfiction*, and studied Norman Mailer's literary nonfiction not only as illuminating certain theoretical points but also as reflecting back on the theory and on the practice of such poetics. The need for a new kind of poetics was registered as early as in the 1970s, when scholars such as Mas'ud Zavarzadeh attempted to account for new literary forms (e.g., the "nonfiction novel") that were felt to reflect and respond to contemporary realities:

I have attempted to point out not only the differences which exist between the nonfiction novel and the fictive novel, but also the divergences between the traditional modernist poetics of the early part of the century and what I have called the supramodern sensibility: the aesthetics that informs both the nonfiction novel and transfiction as well as other new forms of art in nonliterary media. (1976: viii)

The poetics of nonfiction developed in this study is, however, different from that suggested by Zavarzadeh. For him the mode of "the nonfiction novel" amounts to an accurate reflection of the contemporary, "postmodern" social reality. In my view, self-reflexive literary nonfiction, as represented by Mailer's work, is a strongly figurative and *interpretive* mode of writing, necessarily entailing a failure to represent the complex reality that eludes full textualization. Yet while my idea of the form and function of literary nonfiction is almost opposite to Zavarzadeh's view of the characteristics of the nonfiction novel, my conclusion may be similar as regards the importance of such nonfiction as a complex in-between mode in which the features of the fictional and factual discourses partly overlap. Moreover, I concur with Zavarzadeh's pioneering work in the recognition of the centrality of Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*, "a puzzling book both in its generic status and in its aesthetic mode of being" (Zavarzadeh 1976: 154), recognition of its rather unchallenged position at the core of the debates on the poetics of nonfiction.

As suggested in this study, self-reflexive literary nonfiction combines some of the practices of fiction and of factual discourse, foregrounding both its poetic and its referential functions, and involving its author in embedded narratives or *mise en abyme* structures. The author takes different positions in different works of nonfiction – Mailer, in particular, often places himself, as the writer of the book, within its story-world. This calls for a distinction between the actual author (who is responsible for the textual production in a specific historical situation), the textual, or implied author (who is “present” in the very textual construction of the book), and the reporter as a character (who is shown trying to write the story which will make the book that we are reading). My view of literary nonfiction takes these possibilities into account and is both focused on and restricted to such narratives which foreground their consciousness of their ‘literary’ and ‘nonfictional’ aspects and their ‘poetic’ and ‘referential’ functions, narratives that show theoretical reflection on what literary nonfiction might be. I show that what makes Mailer’s literary nonfiction a complex mode is its dual, referential-poetic function which accords equal importance to both the “topical” and the “perennial” issues, although these issues are raised on different levels of narrative communication. For example, Mailer’s topical theme in *The Executioner’s Song*, the execution of Gary Gilmore and events surrounding it, also exists outside this textual organization, and therefore Mailer’s representation can be compared to other representations. However, Mailer’s way of organizing his larger, “perennial” themes inside the narrative text is entirely his own, and it transcends the frames of his topical concerns. In Stein Haugom Olsen’s words, “the [perennial] theme of a literary work emerges from the subject it has, the way in which the subject is presented, the rhetorical features used in its presentation, and the structure it is given” (1987: 193-194). It may be argued that the *theme* of *Executioner*, the threat of blank meaninglessness, has relatively little to do with the Gilmore case as such, even though the actual case gave Mailer the impetus to write his narrative. What is more, Mailer explores the real-life case via his own typical themes, motifs, figures, and structures, as he did in the case of the first moon flight in *Of a Fire on the Moon*. This is a figurative and mythologizing aspect in Mailer’s literary nonfiction, associated with his foregrounding of poetic function of his work at the expense of its referential function.

In Mailer’s work fiction and nonfiction are in a constant reciprocal relationship. Mailer’s narrative techniques, imaginative worlds, private mythologies, recurring figures, and obsessive thematics construct a solid basis for both his fiction and nonfiction. Despite (or because of) this common basis, his separate works are highly individualized, and each constitutes a

new development of both ideologically coherent and stylistically varying poetics of nonfiction. *The Armies of the Night*, for example, conjures up a strongly subjective and rhetorically sparkling vision in order to make sense of the chaos of contemporary reality, while *The Executioner's Song* divides its painful subject matter into conflicting and fragmented viewpoints, at the same time staging the absence of its previously visible author. In addition to these extraordinary works, I have devoted separate chapters to two other nonfictional narratives: *Of a Fire on the Moon*, Mailer's most metatextual work, which processes not only the moonflight but also, emphatically, the problems of representing it, and *Oswald's Tale*, a symptomatic case of the rhetoric of nonfiction as it communicates a strong authorial vision about a very well-known but very ambiguous historical event.

"May that be claimed of many histories?" Mailer asks in *The Armies of the Night* (AN 219). In other words, what other comparable *oeuvres* of literary nonfiction can be found? In addition to Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Mailer's works, especially *The Armies of the Night* and *The Executioner's Song*, remain the American classics of the mode. They are, rather, in a category by themselves, since Capote's book comes rather closer to a classical realist novel narrated by an omniscient authorial voice, whereas Wolfe's text is almost disturbingly experimental in its postmodernist pyrotechnics.

Mailer's nonfictional narratives have been my main examples of self-reflexive texts which may produce a "reflexive reading" by critical readers conscious of the complexities of literary conventions (including genre and intertextuality) and of the complexities of experiential reality in our contemporary media world. Literary nonfictions written by actual authors and read by actual readers use deliberate narrative, poetic and rhetorical devices in order to produce specific aesthetic, emotional, and ethical effects in their audiences. They do this especially when dealing with historical, social, and political events potentially familiar to those audiences. The *poetic* (and narratological) approach of my thesis consists in the use of a variety of theoretical tools for a description and analysis of structural, narrative, stylistic and aesthetic aspects of Mailer's literary nonfiction. The *pragmatic* approach of the study is concerned with the authorial intentions in the production of literary works and with the readers' possible expectations of and interpretive attitudes to those works. In this poetic-pragmatic approach, the reflexive understanding of the complex mode of literary nonfiction requires a consideration of both 'textual' and 'contextual' aspects. While there are certain narrative and formal differences between fiction and nonfiction, their distinction is largely a pragmatic one. Hence, fiction and nonfiction are distinct

discursive modes or “speech-acts” with different aims and purposes, including different reference links to the world. Finally, my *rhetorical* analysis (in many ways interconnected with poetics and pragmatics) deals with the specific narrative techniques that sway the attitudes of the reader and with the different audience positions in and toward narratives, the readers’ options of evaluating, accepting or resisting the books’ presentation of actual events and persons.

As suggested in my Introduction, ‘literary nonfiction’ is only one of the elusive concepts to characterize such fact-based artistic writing which foregrounds both its poetic and referential functions. Literary nonfiction may still be the great unexplored territory of contemporary criticism, as Barbara Lounsberry argued at the beginning of her study *The Art of Fact: Contemporary Artists of Nonfiction* (1990). A decade later, John Hartsock, in his book *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (2000), stated his belief that our understanding of the literary form of nonfiction is still very much emerging. While some early contributions to the theory of literary nonfiction emphasized the similarities between postmodernist fiction and nonfiction, some recent studies have opened new theoretical possibilities, especially with their connections to the rhetorical theory of narrative and possible-worlds theory. In conclusion, these theoretical possibilities – and my own thesis – can be formulated as follows: (1) literary nonfiction should be considered as a form of literary and narrative art different from fiction; (2) nonfiction raises aesthetic, pragmatic, and ethical issues and implications of its own, demanding an analysis of the multilayered rhetorical communications between authors and audiences, and (3) authors (Mailer in my case) develop self-reflexive projects which require revisions of narrative poetics just as general narrative poetics can illuminate individual works.

In my tentative combination of narratological poetics, literary pragmatics, the rhetorical theory of narrative, and analysis of works by Norman Mailer, I have proposed a series of refinements in the poetics of literary nonfiction. This poetics is not a fixed system, a closed world; rather it is a field open for further analysis, critical negotiation, and rhetorical communication. The development of this field follows genre innovations in literary art, and it is to be hoped that literary theory may not remain far behind these breakthroughs and achievements.

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