

*Norman Mailer's Existentialism; Or, the Divine Essence
of Psychopathy*

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Norman Mailer's 1957 piece 'The White Negro' has polarised critics for several decades and remains, to this day, highly polemical.¹ While the racial assumptions that Mailer relayed through his essay are problematic and have been tackled by more recent criticism, its ontological significance remains largely unexplored. In 'The White Negro', Mailer seeks to combine a form of spiritual immanence with the Existentialist paradigm; attempting to craft a variant of Existentialism that resonates with a number of traditions and paradigms typically American, amongst which are transcendentalism and individualism.

In the Existentialist model of Sartre, the pivotal notion of engagement is conceived as a movement that emanates from the innermost self and that expands outwards, a movement seeking to defeat the stasis of nothingness. It exemplifies an original act of creation whose roots are phenomenological – an impulse initiated by the reflexive capacity of consciousness. For Mailer in 'The White Negro', while this ontological impulse is acknowledged, it is grounded, primarily, in the body; generating a form of engagement that correlates with physical energy:

Movement is always to be preferred to inaction. In motion a man has a chance, his body is warm, his instincts are quick, and when the crisis comes, whether of love or violence, he can make it, he can win, he can release a little more energy for himself since he hates himself a little less, he can make a little better nervous system, make it a little more possible to go again, to go faster next time and so make more and thus find more people with whom he can swing.²

¹Norman Mailer, 'The White Negro' [1957], in *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, ed. by Ann Charters (London: Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 582-605.

²Ibid., p. 596.

Albeit rooted in the senses, this form of engagement parallels that of Sartre on a larger scale: it aims to project the self outwards into historical reality by means of a movement which is, in essence, self-affirmative – a movement conceptualised in the essay through the term ‘swing’.³ Vastly polysemic, Mailer’s ‘swing’ may be construed as a reference to the musical genre of the same name, where the beat fluctuates and is prone to improvisation. ‘Swing’ also refers to the vernacular language in use in the 1950s, a lingo enabling its speakers to capture, and relay, their most intimate relationship with the conditions of the here-and-now through language:

Like most primitive vocabularies each word is a prime symbol and serves a dozen or a hundred functions of communication in the instinctive dialectic through which the hipster perceives his experience, that dialectic of the instantaneous differentials of existence in which one is forever moving forward into more or retreating into less’.⁴

As performative as it is reflective, Mailer’s ‘hip’ lingo can be interpreted as a language that carries an ontology of affects. The series of colloquial terms mentioned in the essay – ‘be with it’, ‘cool’, ‘dig’, ‘flip’, ‘creep’ – indicate a wide range of states of consciousness that envision the self dynamically, a self getting closer to, or drawing further away from, the essence of absolute reality.⁵ For Mailer, ‘to swing is to be able to learn, and by learning take a step towards making it, towards creating’.⁶

Ingrained in the body, Mailer’s ‘swing’ also alludes to sexual promiscuity, a theme widely elicited throughout ‘The White Negro’ in terms that are eerily mystical:

‘To ‘be with it’ is to have grace, is to be closer to the secrets of that unconscious life which will nourish you if you can hear it, for you are then nearer to that God which every hipster believes is located in the senses of his body, that [...] God who is It, who is energy, life, sex, force, the Yoga’s prana, the Reichian’s 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.’⁷

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 599.

⁵Ibid., pp. 596-98.

⁶Ibid., p. 597.

⁷Ibid., pp. 597-98.

By equating 'energy, life, sex, force' with the divine, Mailer suggests that 'swinging', as a type of distinctly sensual engagement, simultaneously regenerates the self on the spiritual plane. 'To 'be with it', therefore, is to positively engage and interact with the transcendental essence of the here-and-now, since for Mailer '(w)e must trust the authority of the senses because that is the closest contact we have to the creator'.⁸ In this sense, Mailer's proto-Existentialism can be envisaged as a type of transcendental ontology in which engagement, as a function of the instinct, exemplifies a transcending movement that expands outwards towards its immediate physical environment and beyond; an engagement which, in turn, enables the corporealisation of the creative impulse of the divine in historical reality via individual self-realisation.

Crucially, such an ontological proposition implies that the transcendent is devised, also, as immanent; presenting a number of analogies with the transcendental ontology of Emerson, in which the universal mind is actuated in the here-and-now through the fulfilment of man's innermost ideas – or, in Emersonian terms, his *intuition*. Yet, Mailer's ontological formulation also deviates from the Emersonian model in crucial ways. For one thing, Mailer confounds individualism with self-centredness. In Emersonianism the transcendental self, which is rooted in the original idea, remains immaculate, impassive to the carnal demands and profane urges of the body. Whereas for Mailer in 'The White Negro', the individual can potentially access a supreme form of being through the free expression of his most primitive instincts, an operation that necessitates the removal of all ethical barriers for the sake of a greater sense of transcendence. Mailer himself seemed to be aware of the flaws that his proposition entails:

Hip, which would return us to ourselves, at no matter what price in individual violence, is the affirmation of the barbarian, for it requires a primitive passion about human nature to believe that individual acts of violence are always to be preferred to the collective violence of the State.⁹

Although deliberately provocative, the instinctual energies and impulsive cravings of the self are nonnegotiable for Mailer; they must be wholly embraced and fulfilled at any price. Accomplished at the detriment of the other, the form of engagement that Mailer promotes in the essay is too radically self-absorbed, unethical and seditious to stand up to the Emersonian standard.

While Mailer's solipsistic defiance can be seen as a form of subversion that operates a transvaluation of values, it also brings to mind the figure of the psychopath – an epitome of

⁸Mailer, *On God: An Uncommon Conversation* [2007], ed. by Michael Lennon (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 65.

⁹Mailer, 'The White Negro', p. 601.

antisocial deviance, general lack of empathy and poor self-control – which, unsurprisingly, is revered provocatively in the essay:

At bottom, the drama of the psychopath is that he seeks [...] an orgasm more apocalyptic than the one which preceded it. Orgasm is his therapy [...]. But in this search, [...] the apocalyptic orgasm often remains as remote as the Holy Grail, [...] so the conditions of his life create it anew in him until the drama of his movements bears a sardonic resemblance to the frog who climbed a few feet in the well only to drop back again.¹⁰

For Mailer, the indomitable energies of the psychopath are primarily articulated through his sex drive, and regularly battered by a tremendous wave of destructive force. Consumed all too soon by his own lust for life, the 'drama of the psychopath' is that he can never reach the object of his desire, despite the tremendous stamina that he releases. Deploying an engagement prodigiously wild and inflamed, but also senseless and ultimately self-destructive, Mailer's psychopath conjures the image of a hysterical drummer beating to a raging swing and breaking through his drum skins before the end of the act. Aiming at nothing but release for its own sake, the type of engagement that Mailer celebrates in his essay turns back onto itself to the detriment of the swinger, sooner or later – an engagement fiercely sexual, which is also intrinsically sterile and onanistic.

References

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¹⁰Ibid., p. 593.