

HARLOT'S GHOST AND THE RISE OF THE AMERICAN-JEWISH NOVEL IN THE FICTION OF NORMAN MAILER

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In *Ancient Evenings* (1983), Mailer's long awaited book on Egypt, old Menenhetet recalls and describes in his narrative to the Pharaoh many of the vanished peoples of the Near and Middle East. There are vivid descriptions of the Hittites and the Nubians and the people of New and Old Tyre in addition to the people of the Two Kingdoms. However on only two occasions does Menenhetet conjure up a people that were to exercise a most profound influence upon the imagination of European cultures - the ancient Hebrews. In one of these passages he refers to Moses as a »Hebrew magician« who had set out to conquer a new land to the East and who had revealed to his companion the secret of immortality and re-birth.¹ This is a plausible rendition of Moses, given Mailer's conception in *Ancient Evenings* of attempting to invoke a historical portrait of the inner life of a highly civilized society and its decline - a society, as Mailer himself believes, steeped in »magic« and completely devoid of the norms and values of Judeo-Christian civilization.² This is made even clearer by the interview Mailer gave to Robert Begiebing in 1983 when Begiebing addresses the question of how Mailer perceived the Hebrews in his novel:

Begiebing - Is it safe to look at Hebrew culture as a competing minor culture at the time?

Mailer - It wasn't even a minor culture at the time. They were still a race of tribes and barbarians. They weren't taken seriously. Later they were. This is 1100 B.C. In fact Moses appears in my book for about a page. He's seen as some sort of minor guerilla who kills some Egyptian guards and takes the Hebrews to a certain town with him across the desert to escape. The idea is to

¹ Norman Mailer, *Ancient Evenings* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1983), 376. All subsequent citations will be taken from this edition.

² In Mailer's interview with Robert Begiebing, Mailer asserts that »while I was writing the book [*Ancient Evenings*] that when I went through it I had to keep making certain that there wasn't a single Judeo-Christian idea in it.« Robert Begiebing, »Twelfth Round: An Interview with Norman Mailer« (1983) in J. Michael Lennon, ed., *Conversations with Norman Mailer* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1988), 327. Mailer continues this train of thought by adding »Actually I think the Egyptians had a tremendous influence over the Hebrews. Much of the Old Testament you find in Egyptian prayers. Some of it is startling. The early pages of Genesis, the first page of Genesis could be taken from certain prayers to Ammon and the ways in which he created the universe« (327) It is probably necessary to say that Mailer's attempt to remove any traces of Judeo-Christian thinking is a reflection of his own ideological stance and not a serious literary endeavor, especially since *Ancient Evenings* is in many respects a rehashing of staple Mailerian themes in the garb of the ancient Egyptians.

immerse yourself in another point of view when you're writing. Because when you do a lot of things come to you.³

Apparently the critic sensed in Mailer's novel an undercurrent of deprecation, an unnecessarily critical historical assessment of the Hebrews colored by some unexplained bias. Mailer's response is important, since it suggests a pattern that has continually appeared in his fiction of perceiving Jews - in this case, Hebrews (which is safe to say a surrogate for Jews) - from the point of view of what he ascribes to his Egyptians in *Ancient Evenings* as a highly complex, aristocratic, »pagan« consciousness.⁴ However, we must make an important emendation here. In general, Mailer, with some notable exceptions in his early work, shunts Jews out of his fictional universe. If Moses is portrayed as a »minor guerilla« in his novel on Egypt, in his earlier work, Jews hardly figure at all, and when they do it is in a strongly negative or ambivalent light.⁵ As Carl Rollyson aptly comments, »The other Jewish writers have seen nothing ignoble in sticking close to home. Yet Mailer's dream of literary greatness seems founded on rejecting his past as a subject.«⁶

Nonetheless the second reference to the Hebrews in *Ancient Evenings* develops our argument even further. Menenhetet launches into a kind of ethnological discussion of the Hebrews in order to illustrate a point about the nature of time:

'They are demented,' said Menenhetet, 'and happy to remain shepherds. They do best when talking to themselves in the hills. Nonetheless, I have observed that barbaric peoples, like beasts, live closer than we do to their Gods.' (A.E., 95)

Menenhetet proceeds to delve into the linguistic oddities of the Hebrew tongue, until he reaches the following insight:

'The Hebrews, I discovered, live with what is before them at every instant - their words reflect such a simple condition. 'I eat,' they say. Simple! But when they wish to speak of what is not before them now, why then you cannot tell (unless you know the trick of the language) whether they are speaking of the past, or what is yet to come. . . . They know how peculiar time can be! And on their thick tongues! Conceive of it. How can we be certain that what we say we will

³ Robert Begiebing, »Twelfth Round: An Interview with Norman Mailer,« 327.

⁴ Begiebing, »Twelfth Round:«, 326-27.

⁵ Mailer was attracted sporadically to Jewish themes at the beginning of his career. In his earliest unpublished novel - *No Percentage* - he told the story of a young man who was trying to break out of the trammels of a middle class Jewish background. In one of his most famous short stories, »The Time of her Time,« (1959) the Mailerian hero is locked in a life and death battle with a middle class Jewish female who is intent on destroying his identity. In *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) Mailer's World War II company contains two Jewish figures, one who ultimately perishes and the other who survives, but who is ultimately relegated to the lower sort of Mailerian character - the anti-heroic type.

⁶ Carl Rollyson, *Lives of Norman Mailer* (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 68.

do tomorrow has not in truth taken place yesterday, although we cannot quite remember since it was in a dream. (A.E., 95-96)

Menenhetet is in fact echoing Mailer's own voice in his newspaper columns in the *Village Voice* on Hasidism, which were later republished in *The Presidential Papers* (1963). The same fascination with time and mystical states and metaphysical truths all find their source in ancient Jewish lore, whether it be that of the Hasidim or of the Hebrews.⁷ Of course the reader senses that this Sapir-Whorfian view of language and reality as Mailer applies it to the ancient Hebrews cannot be taken as an intellectual truth, but rather as a product of Mailer's own imaginings about Judaism. What is significant here is that Mailer idealizes and at the same time places Judaism into a safe but remote niche as an esoteric source of spiritual values. If we were to compare Mailer's invocation of Judaism with that of Martin Buber, we would notice that Buber was attempting to rediscover the mystical sources of Judaism in order to establish its significance and relevance in the present to a non-Jewish audience, not to say the least to answer the attacks of anti-Semitic authors who assailed Judaism for being a religion devoid of genuine spirituality.⁸ On the other hand, Mailer depreciates and debunks the Judaism of the present, preferring to find his positive version of Judaism in a world ensconced in some recondite lore.⁹

In *Harlot's Ghost* (1991), however, a curious yet subtle change takes place in Mailer's fiction, a change that in some way may be compared to a tentative return to his early artistic and emotional roots. *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. Amid this narrative exuberance, one text in particular emerges in a somewhat veiled form - the American-Jewish novel. The first clue to this supposition is when Mailer reveals how the novel originated:

A Russian Jew in the early nineteenth century who happened to be consumed with interest about the nature of the Orthodox Church - he would not have to be on intimate terms with a priest to feel that his comprehension of Russian Orthodoxy was possessed of some accuracy. He would, of course, have required some inner link, some sense that he, as a Jew, if he had been born into Russian Orthodoxy, might have become a monk.¹⁰

On the surface level of the narrative this illustrates Mailer's concept of empathy - proof that one can write about themes outside of one's immediate experience by having recourse

⁷ Norman Mailer, *The Presidential Papers* (St. Albans: Panther, 1976). Mailer's exposition on Jews is quite elaborate in this work, based on the grandiose and obviously ironic intention to reveal to the reader »The Nature of the Jews« (18).

⁸ Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim* (New York: Avon, 1970). See especially the introductory essay in which Buber discusses his interest in the Hasidic parables (3-17).

⁹ This thesis can be supported by reference to Mailer's principal disquisition on Judaism found in the already cited *The Presidential Papers*, 205-218.

¹⁰ Norman Mailer, *Harlot's Ghost* (London: Michael Joseph, 1991), v. All subsequent citations will be taken from this edition and designated (H.G., + page number).

to the imagination, which is a working part of every novelist's resources. On a still deeper level the analogy of a Russian Jew attempting to grasp the mysteries of the Orthodox Church and Mailer the novelist attempting to apprehend the inner workings of the CIA leads one to suspect that the Russian Jew, whom Mailer is a scion of, has insinuated himself in some form into Mailer's own narrative of the CIA.

In the first place the narrator, Harry Hubbard, describes his narrative, the Alpha Manuscript, as »a *Bildungsroman*, an extended narrative of a young man's education and development« (H.G., 94). The *Bildungsroman* has traditionally been one of the more common narrative forms in American-Jewish literature, encompassing such diverse works as *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953). As Bernard Sherman notes, »The education novel exactly reproduces the central experience of American Jewry: the movement from the enclosed shtetl (Eastern European village) environment with its highly ordered and pervasive moral system (diffused by peasant lore and a necessarily realistic view of humanity) to the exacting demands of an industrial society.«¹¹ Influenced by the Yiddish tradition, which was in turn influenced by the German tradition, the American-Jewish novel emphasized education as synonymous with personal growth or with the discovery of one's Jewishness or with spiritual growth. It is perhaps a special irony here intended for the reader in *Harlot's Ghost* that a young man's spiritual growth would in some way be tied to a career in the CIA.

Harlot's Ghost is replete with alternative texts and ironies emerging from this juxtaposition. For example, at the beginning of the manuscript, the narrator informs us of his family origins, and this reads like a tale by John P. Marquand, whom Mailer by the way admired or, more recently, the novels of Louis B. Auchincloss. But suddenly, amid describing the gentry of American society and its hallowed tradition, he begins to describe his mother, and the tone changes, invoking undercurrents of Philip Roth and Saul Bellow:

My mother was small-boned, attractive, and blonde, and she lived, but for summer at Southampton, in that social nucleus of New York which is bounded by Fifth Avenue on the West, Park Avenue to the east, the Eighties to the north and the Sixties to the south. She was a Jewish Princess but the emphasis can be put on the second word. She could not have told you the difference between the Torah and the Talmud. She brought me up to be ignorant of every Jewish subject but one: the names of prominent New York banking houses with Semitic roots. I think my mother thought of Salomon Brothers and Lehman Brothers as ports of call in some future storm. (H.G., 98)

The Jewish Mother then appears as the staple of every American-Jewish text, but this time without the usual amount of humor or affection or even ambivalence. Hubbard's mother follows the long line of Mailerian Bitch - goddesses, attempting to emasculate their male partners - in this case the narrator's Hemingwayesque father.

Still the narrator invokes yet another figure that also belongs to the American-Jewish novel, a figure that generally plays a crucial role in the character's search for *Bildung* - the wise grandfather-patriarch who is succinctly described as »a remarkable man« who worked

¹¹ Bernard Sherman, *The Invention of the Jew: Jewish-American Education Novels (1916-64)* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1969), 20.

his way up from being »a street peddler to the clear-cut status of a department-store owner« (H.G., 98). It would be tempting to read *roman a clef* associations into this text. After all Mailer's own grandfather's name was Chaim Yehudah Schneider who, according to one critic, was »renowned for his religious devotion and scholarship.«¹²

However, this familiar theme is dropped and is replaced by a theme that is more of an integral part of the Mailer *oeuvre*. The narrator is in some way dislocated from his roots and experience, filled with *Angst* and dread as so many Mailerian characters are, lost in a world that is characterized by violence and menace. The Jewish theme is then incorporated into this general frame:

At any rate, I can hardly pretend that I ended as any good fraction of a Jew. My only kinship with 'that herring baron', as my mother referred to great-great-grandfather Chaim Silberzweig, is that Semitic slurs made me tense. I might as well have grown up in a ghetto for the size of the fury aroused in me. For I would then feel Jewish. Of course, my idea of feeling Jewish was to be reminded of the strain on people's faces in the rush hour on the New York subway as they stood prey to harsh and screeching sounds. (H.G., 99)

This is perhaps one of the few passages in Mailer's fiction, in which the feeling of being a Jew is so directly rendered. Not since the *Naked and the Dead* (1948) have Jewish characters been allowed to speak for themselves, but the characters in *The Naked and the Dead* are more safely ensconced in a literary tradition that is rooted in certain recognizable literary models.¹³ In *Harlot's Ghost* the narrator is deracinated to the point, where his Jewishness becomes a kind of negative identity, evoking feelings of rage and fear, simply because he has never incorporated them into his own American identity.

The Jewish text is not stable and surface-rooted in *Harlot's Ghost*. After this promising beginning the reader might expect the Jewish theme to be an integral part of the novel. However the theme disappears and reappears at strange moments in the narrative. For example, in a borrowing from Mailer's earlier works (e.g. *The Presidential Papers*) the mentor-figure Harlot suddenly recalls an episode from Hasidism:

'There's a story I was told about some far-fetched, terribly intense sect of Jewish people called Hasidism. They used to inhabit village ghettos in Russia and the Ukraine. It seems that one of their folk, a rabbi, was so devotional that he prayed to God forty times a day. Finally, after forty years, the rabbi grew impatient and said, »God I have loved You for so long that I want You to reveal Yourself to me? Whereupon God did just that. He revealed Himself. How do you think the rabbi reacted?« (H.G., 135)

¹² Rollyson, *Lives of Norman Mailer*, 1.

¹³ In *The Naked and the Dead* the plot and characterization, as critics have amply documented, are moulded by the conventions of literary Naturalism. Goldstein and Roth, the two Jewish characters in the novel, are victims of larger, inscrutable forces shaping their lives. Nonetheless there are other motifs shaping the creation of the Jewish figures. For example, Roth is a variant of Ahasverus, the Wandering Jew, searching for his deracinated identity and Goldstein has been influenced by the motifs of *shtetl* literature, mediated by the American-Jewish writers of the Thirties.

The punch line, despite the deliberate ingenuousness of the narrative, leads to a strange twist of thought which is not flattering to Jewishness. Jehovah was a paternal, oppressive God. On the other hand, Christ, by forgiving the sons for the sins of the fathers, liberated human consciousness. No longer afraid of divine punishment, humankind could venture forth and discover the world of nature. This is, of course, interesting and logical if not quite fair to Jehovah. But then the rather strange corollary applying to the Jews: «The Jews, of course, having rejected Christ, had to keep dealing with Jehovah for the next two millenia. So they never forgot. God is awesome. 'O God, do not reveal Yourself to me. Not all at once!' (H.G., 136) Of course we learn in *Harlot's Ghost* that Harlot is also a flawed god in the Hellenistic sense of the word. Believing, like the author, in a Manichean vision steeped in conspiracies, Harlot may have been - at least in the novel - the mastermind behind the Kennedy assassination. That this certainly diminishes the importance of this thesis in the overall structure of the novel is only partly valid, since Harlot, like other similar figures in Mailer's *oeuvre*, serves as a philosopher *manque* for the author, expatiating on a wide variety of themes which preoccupy the author in his non-fiction works. In brief, the implication is that the Jews, reflecting the familiar anti-Semitic stereotype, are arrested in their own realm of antiquated traditions, severed from the modern world of progress and science - perhaps in some weird way embodying an alternative to the destructive impulses of modern science («That was the beginning of the technological sleigh ride which may destroy us yet.» (H.G., 136)) - but nevertheless tied by the shackles of fear and superstition to some merciless God.

On the other hand, a curious element in the novel, which persists throughout the narrative structure, are the loan words from Yiddish. The CIA then appears ironically almost to resemble a Jewish organization coining and borrowing their own Jewish expressions in order to cement their Jewish identity. For example, familiar words, such as »kishkas,« »shtup,« »to put the kibosh on,« but also new turns of phrases such as »high on a rabbi,« or »You're locked in with the wrong rabbi,« all add to the notion that the theme of Jewishness has permeated the novel in a fundamental way.

The third character in *Harlot's Ghost* that is crucial for Mailer's rendition of Jewishness is Ned Rosen. A character familiar to the Mailer *oeuvre*, Rosen embodies those qualities that are ultimately negative in Mailer's world view. For Rosen is homosexual, middle class and Jewish. The first reference connected to Rosen and Jewishness in the novel explains the agony of conversion: »Do you know what it means for a Jew to convert? You feel like a Judas to your own people?« (H.G., 64) Rosen then first appears in the narrative as a flawed character, since he has violated his own integrity, as we learn in *The Presidential Papers*, surrendering a sacred, deep part of himself in order to conform to the majority culture.¹⁴ When the narrator then replies to Rosen's account of his conversion, the theme of Jewishness takes on all the familiar connotations normally characterized in Mailer's work:

I tried to search my starched soul - starched, I had to recognize, in its likes and dislikes - to determine whether I had been over-hard on Rosen. I had always assumed he converted to advance certain professional pursuits. . . In the old days

¹⁴ In *The Presidential Papers*, Mailer vividly describes the psychological and moral damage wrought by assimilation upon minorities, most notably Jews and Blacks (206-207).

of slavish training at the Farm, our group of *stunts* . . . used to look upon Rosen as a bagel-baby from the middle class purlieus of the Bronx. (H.G., 64)

»Bagel-baby,« »middle class purlieus,« »Bronx,« all reflect certain obvious cultural stereotypes which are tacitly accepted by the narrator. However, it is the narrator's response to Rosen that illuminates the special Mailerian theme of ambivalence to Jewishness most clearly:

With Rosen present, they could laugh at him instead of me. . . . Of course they might also have laughed because he was their token Jew doing Gentile's work, and I think that burned his soul. I know I suffered with him, since I had something like an eighth of Jewish blood by way of my mother, just enough never to know quite what to do about it. (H.G., 65)

The motif of »one eighth of Jewish blood« is referred to in *Harlot's Ghost* on three occasions, pointing to the theme of Jewishness as a marginal yet unassimilable part of one's identity - an enigma among the myriad parts of one's self, loosed from any connection to merging into a meaningful structure of identity¹⁵.

Rosen then conforms to the familiar Mailerian figure embodying the category of the unheroic. However the attributes - Jewish, middle class, homosexual - centered in one character, point to a new combination of categories in Mailer's work. Normally, the homosexual character in Mailer's fiction takes on more cosmic dimensions, invoking images of the existential hero, as in Marion O'Faye in *The Deer Park* (1955) or of the Fascist anti-Christ as in General Cummings in *The Naked and the Dead*.¹⁶ Perhaps Rosen resembles most closely the dimly sketched character of the Jewish boyfriend in his short story »The Time of her Time,« (1959) although the motif of homosexuality is never explicitly stated.¹⁷

It is significant that homosexuality in connection with Jewishness becomes a comical concept for the first time in Mailer's work. No longer enmeshed in theological and metaphysical conceptions, all pointing to the loss of moral integrity and existential identity, homosexuality in Rosen's case is treated lightly almost as part of *shitik*:

¹⁵ In *An American Dream* (1965), the protagonist Rojack is »half Jewish«. However, this theme is never seriously developed in the novel.

¹⁶ Homosexuality has been an obsessive theme in Mailer's work from the beginning, an understanding of which would shed light on Mailer's vision. In *The Armies of the Night* (1968) Mailer *qua* narrator suggests that homosexuality (repeating a familiar homophobic attitude) is in some way connected to all the ills and failures of a society steeped in technological fetishism and alienation: » - to him it seemed that much of life and most of society was designed precisely to drive men deep into homosexuality and onanism; . . . « See *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, The Novel as History* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1968), 35. See Andrew Gordon's valuable study of Mailer from the vantage point of psychoanalysis - *An American Dreamer: A Psychoanalytic Study of the Fiction of Norman Mailer* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1980).

¹⁷ In »The Time of Her Time,« the Jewish lover, Arthur, is described as a »passive male« who indulges in "oral perversions," *Advertisements for Myself* (1959) (London: Panther, 1972), 406.

Well I won't take up our time with the demoralizingly sad little tale Rosen had to tell. His closet is a dungeon and he is most unhappy with his habit. He would like to break out. He feels what he terms 'subliminal stirrings' he has never felt before toward the other sex. I tell him that it wouldn't be a bad idea to commence a new habit. 'Sex,' I tell him, 'for those who are interested only in the bottom line is naught but a notably agreeable friction in a familiar channel.' 'Should I start with whores?' he asked, and promptly confessed to a most interesting notion that he might be able to cross the bridge with such a highly promiscuous partner because then he would be in propinquity with all the men who had gone before him.' (H.G., 1046)

»Crossing the line« is treated as frivolously in this case as in a popular Broadway play, and what contributes to these pop-cultural elements is that the motif of becoming heterosexual is coupled with professional advancement. Rosen wants to rise in the hierarchy of the CIA, but cannot, because he is not married. If this did not contain elements of the classic sitcom, Rosen is encouraged then to marry a non-Jew. The non-Jewish partner is also a stock character derived from the old school-marm tradition, a »virgin,« »plain as a post« - a figure taken straight out of the Western or out of the literature of the frontier in general. The comedy routine then becomes transformed into a typical temptation drama found in Yiddish literature of the weak Jew being tempted by the devil to renounce his faith:

'What is she like personally?' he asked. 'A churchgoer,' I told him, 'plain as a post.' 'Well,' he said, 'that makes it sound like an arranged marriage.' 'So it is,' I told him. 'We're not inclined to waste each other's time, are we? Your co-religionists used to go in for arranged marriages in the *shtetl*, did they not? Your blood must be teeming with such arrangements.' 'Yes, he answered, 'but the bride was not a churchgoer.' 'Yes but then you are not much of a Jew any longer, are you?' I countered. 'No,' he answered, 'not much. The emotional bond, however, is desperately deep.' 'How deep?' 'Well not so deep that I can't take a look.' (H.G., 1047)

Temptation and corruption are essential themes in the Mailerian opus, but nowhere are these themes connected with Jewishness. By invoking the *shtetl* and the conversion drama, Mailer is employing a new text to develop an established theme. Still despite the burlesque elements of this story ('I was not wild about her breath,' he replied. 'Well, you've got to get passed the non-essentials,' I told him; (H.G., 1048) 'she couldn't have been more thrilled: a potential convert from Judaism was as exciting to her as an Italian tenor to an English lady.' (H.G., 1047)), there is an essential element that stifles the comic. »The emotional bond is however desperately deep« transports us from the comic tale of a Jewish homosexual seeking career advancement in the CIA, who, suddenly desiring to be heterosexual, attempts to seduce and marry a Methodist old maid in order to report on her confidential secrets to a deeper level of meaning. If this is also *shtik*, it touches too closely on the pathos of loss, akin to someone suddenly revealing a serious yet fragmented thought amidst a wildly improbable, burlesque scene. In this sense it does not seem to belong to the tale; instead it resembles more closely the central tenor of the sub-text of the Jew who only feels like a Jew when he is insulted, the »one eighth Jew who does not quite know what to do about his Jewishness.«

The Rosen figure in *Harlot's Ghost* is important in another sense since Rosen is one of the few characters in the novel who is afforded in this partly epistolary novel a letter of his own. Apart from Hubbard, Kittredge, Cal and Harlot, none of the other characters in this vast panoply of figures is granted this authorial preeminence. What this virtually means is that Rosen's letter, like the other letters in this novel, becomes a sub-text, harboring a significance and a distinct narrative status within the novel. In Rosen's letter we find the complete Jewish voice, as opposed to »the one eighth Jew,« making its contribution together with all the other voices within *Harlot's Ghost*. »Because, whatever I am, abrasive, unfeeling of the sore spots of others, too pushy (New York Jew with a lot to do - I know!) but whatever I am, whatever my faults, I am not a brown-noser.« (H.G., 328-29)

The Jewish voice then in Rosen's letter carefully unfolds, weaving its almost exclusively macabre Jewish tale. The tale is told in all the local color ornamenting the Yiddish folk tale:

I find an unholy desire to tell you about the worst fiasco we ever had, which is why this letter has to be Ultra-BAP. It could fry my *kishkes* if read by the wrong eyes. Do not bother about the meaning of *kishkes*. This is argot from Yiddish and will advance nothing you're interested in. I mention it only because the nominal head of TSS is named Gottlieb, and *kishkes* is the only Jewish word I ever heard him use. Of course, they assigned me to him - I guess they figure we have something in common. Well, not all that much. Some Jews are deep in tradition like my family, which is half religious-orthodox, half socialist - typically Jewish, ha, ha - but some Jews go in the other direction. They become mirrors of their culture. (Like me!) Like Disraeli, the British Prime Minister under Queen Victoria, born of Jewish parents, but they say he had the best upper-class English accent of anyone in the British Isles. (H.G., 331)

The discourse form of the Jewish tale can be defined more precisely. To begin with, the narrator begins with a sense of misfortune (»the worst fiasco we ever had«) couched in humor (»It could fry my *kiskes*«). Secondly the digressions rooted in intellectual or quasi-intellectual explanation (»Some Jews go in the other direction. They become mirrors of their culture.«) Thirdly, the putative self-effacement presented to the Gentile reader (»This is argot from Yiddish and will advance nothing you're interested in«). Fourthly the use of deliberate naivete which is in fact disingenuous irony (»I guess they figure we have something in common«). Fifthly, the expression of a belief in a typical Jewish mode of consciousness (»typically Jewish«). Finally the improbable comparison revealing some underlying solidarity and kinship (»(Like me), like Disraeli.«) We can also add that the implied narrator is being deliberately disingenuous, talking about Disraeli's accent and the attitude to his Jewishness and the question of assimilation, which was of course far more complex than that hinted at here.¹⁸

Embedded in Rosen's epistolary tale is a familiar Jewish figure that recurs throughout Jewish literature - the *Luftmensch*, that wild improbable picaresque hero that embellishes the work from Sholom Aleichem to Saul Bellow. Curiously enough, given his outspoken dislike of Bellow's work, at least in the early part of Mailer's career, it is ironic that

¹⁸ On Disraeli's relation to his Jewishness, see the illuminating study by Hans Mayer, which appeared initially in German under the title *Aufenseiter* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), 366-380.

Mailer's figure of Gottlieb could be a creation out of *Henderson the Rain King* (1959) or *Herzog* (1964):

Well Gottlieb is like that except he's cosmic in scope, interested in everything. Odd! He's lives on a farm outside of Washington and gets up every morning to milk his goats. The farmhouse itself used to be a slave cabin, but Gottlieb is a Sunday carpenter, so it's big enough now to house his family. Mrs. Gottlieb, incidentally, spent her childhood in India. That may be the explanation for the Goats! She's the daughter of Presbyterian missionaries. Gottlieb also raises Christmas trees. And he has a club foot, but loves all the same to square-dance. He's only a chemist with a degree from City College, but he's none-the-less a genius. Which is why in summary he sounds like nothing but pieces and parts. I must say, he's messed up. Of course, only a genius can when in concert with another genius like Hugh Montague. (H.G., 331)

As in Bellow there is the same improbable juxtaposition of qualities («cosmic in scope» and «milks his goats»), the same wild amalgam of the sacred and the profane, the profound and the trivial, the intellectual and the popular. There is also the same wild humor, the unbridled hilarity that underlies much of Jewish literature: («Mrs. Gottlieb spent her childhood in India. That may be the explanation for the Goats!«). There is also the sense of the grotesque («and he has a club foot, but he loves all the same to square-dance.«) as well as exaggeration («only a genius can when in concert with another genius«). Finally there is the marvellous turn of phrase that is so characteristic of American-Jewish literature, the inventive phrase that emerges from the prism of a multi-lingual setting («Which is why in summary he sounds like nothing but pieces and parts«).¹⁹

Consonant with the fragmented structure of the American-Jewish novel in *Harlot's Ghost*, there are also sudden, surprising, positive invocations of Jewishness. For example, when the naive narrator experiences his rite of passage at the CIA training camp he expresses his unalloyed patriotism and belief in America's mission by recalling a Jewish parable:

I had an epiphany. I was reminded of those distant relatives of mine, the Jews, who believed in twelve just men. Once at Yale, a lecturer in Medieval History had spoken of the ancient ghetto belief that the reason that God did not destroy the universe whenever He became enraged at humankind, was because of His twelve just men. None of the twelve had any conception that he was unique, but the natural and unwitting goodness of each of these rare men was so pleasing to God that He tolerated the rest of us. (H.G., 175)

¹⁹ Mailer virtually mounted a literary campaign against Bellow in the Fifties, attacking Bellow's characters as being neurasthenic and devoid of heroic qualities. See for example Mailer's piece in *Advertisements for Myself* in the edition already cited, «Evaluations - Quick and Expensive Comments on the Talent in the Room,» 381-82. In his later work, *Cannibals and Christians* (1966), Mailer reassesses Bellow's work, writing quite approvingly of *Henderson the Rain King*, but ultimately castigating Bellow as being «too timid» to become a major writer. See *Cannibal and Christians* (Frogmore: Panther, 1979), 122.

In the first place the narrator is suddenly forging a link to his Jewishness which he had either hitherto denied or was unable to establish. Secondly the analogy of the Jews as the chosen people and America as the chosen country is a surprising collocation in the Mailer opus, since Jewishness is rarely associated with virtue, but rather with dull, prosaic middle class conformity.²⁰ Thirdly the use of Jewish spiritual and ethical lore has been previously confined to Mailer's non-fiction (the only example actually being *The Presidential Papers*), while his fiction has invariably shunted out any reference to Jewishness, except by making references to contemporary aspects of Jewishness.²¹

Amid the various episodes, anecdotes, allusions, and tropes all tied to Jewishness but yet dislocated, placed, in a narrative sense, seemingly haphazardly throughout the novel, there is one episode that establishes the narrator's bond to his Jewishness in a way that leaves no doubt that self-knowledge and deeply felt experience are at issue. The episode is constructed with apparent innocence. Seeking an apartment from which to spy on the Soviets, the narrator stumbles upon the Bosqueverde's who are »vintage Jewish refugees from the Nazis« (H.G., 456) First the surprising detail told by the narrator with admiration. Although the Bosqueverdes changed their name from the original German, the husband retains his very Jewish first name Hyman. Then the initial intimation that a process of awareness has started for the narrator: »I am absolutely fascinated by these Bosqueverdes. They are the first Jewish family I have ever visited, and everything they do is of interest to me.« (H.G., 457) The confrontation with Jewishness suddenly awakens all kinds of positive feelings in the narrator:

Sometimes one of Hyman Bosqueverdes students will be studying with the old man in an alcove removed from the camera, and I listen to the mutual recital of Hebrew as if all the words are magical. The man and the boy wear skullcaps and that seems equally arcane to me. Think of it ! They are getting ready for a Bar-Mitzvah in the midst of all this. (H.G., 457)

This resembles the rediscovery scene so common in American-Jewish literature. Suddenly amidst a commonplace or even banal milieu, the narrator *shlemiel* confronts a family or a setting or even a symbol that brings his Jewishness full force back to him. The hero's quest for *Bildung* leads one initially away from Jewishness into the world of the secular with all its temptations, ultimately to have him in a circle-like movement return to his Jewish roots. If this episode were not delineated clearly enough, the narrator must emphasize its meaning and significance by inserting a summation: »On the drive to my hotel I keep thinking about the Jews. They are only one-eighth of me but I have this peculiar whole response to them.« (H.G., 458)

²⁰ In *The Presidential Papers* Mailer writes, »It is possible the Jews will never recover from the woe [the Holocaust] that no miracle visited the world in that time. Perhaps that is why we are now so interested in housing, in social planning, interfaith councils and improvement of the PTA in the suburbs. . . Perhaps that is why we have lost the root« (210).

²¹ If we examine Mailer's novels we find, prior to *Harlot's Ghost*, the only Jewish themes and characters explicitly rendered are found in *The Naked and the Dead*. A case could be made for *The Deer Park* (1955) that some of the characters in Mailer's Hollywood are Jewish, but this theme is never developed in the novel and is insignificant in terms of its overall themes and intentions.

This is perhaps the key passage in the mosaic of narrative forms that make up the text of the American Jewish novel in *Harlot's Ghost*. There is only one other passage related to Jewishness that embroiders one of the other central texts of the novel - the epistolary novel of love and deception between Harry Hubbard and Kittredge:

For a time I wrote passionate letters to Kittredge but she did not respond. Finally she referred to the Talmud. 'Here, Harry, is wisdom for the small part of you that is Jewish. When the old Babylonian Hebrews did not wish to indulge a powerful temptation, they built a fence around their desire. Since one fence is never strong enough to hold the impulse, they built a fence around the fence. Therefore, I do not see you, and I do not encourage love letters. (H.G., 1111)

Once again a Hasidic parable is invoked, and this illuminates the central preoccupation of the novel: the Jewish character's self-proclaimed search for *Bildung*. Throughout *Harlot's Ghost* the protagonist stumbles across a series of mentor figures, all in some way supplying him with various forms of »wisdom,« much of which is borrowed from Jewish tradition and lore. It is, of course, quite absurd that figures as divorced from Jewish culture and belief as Harlot, Kittredge, Harvey, would cite a relevant passage from the Talmud or coin a Yiddish phrase. However this only underscores the thesis that the narrator is in fact moving within a realm of Jewish values and beliefs which ought to lead him in some form to wholeness and *Menchlekhayt*.

That this is not the case in *Harlot's Ghost* has more to do with the other texts in the novel. *Harlot's Ghost* is a Gothic tale of treachery and betrayal. It is also a novel of abortive love as well as a typically Mailerian history-as-novel or novel-as-history. It is indeed furthermore a novel of espionage as well as an American initiation drama. All of these texts exert their pull on each other in the narrative, influencing the purposively contrived, incomplete denouement of the novel. However if the Gothic novel ultimately holds the dominant sway of the novel and the narrator finds himself on the run heading towards Moscow, believing that Harlot, who supposedly had committed suicide, may still be alive, even at this juncture in the novel, where *Angst* and dread triumph, the narration can still not resist inserting another little motif in which, out of all the exotic landscapes that *Harlot's Ghost* conjures up for the American reader - Uruguay, Cuba, Berlin, Moscow even the Everglades - the Grand Concourse, the grand boulevard of the Bronx with its several generations of Jewish life and culture, is briefly alluded to along with Mr. and Mrs. Lowenthal. That the narrator finds it necessary to mention . . . »the old Jewish lady in whose apartment on the Grand Concourse I had rented a room« (H.G., 87) suggests that the Jewish text exerts an omnipresent influence on the conception of *Harlot's Ghost*.

Thus *Harlot's Ghost* marks still another turning point in Mailer's opus, introducing themes and figures that had remained nearly banished from his fiction since *The Naked and The Dead*. The intertextual basis of the novel is interesting, since *Harlot* borrows both from Mailer's own work on Jewishness as well as from texts from Mailer's contemporaries. In the case of the former, the references to Hasidism are inspired by Mailer's own *Village Voice* column on the same theme, which was later included in *The Presidential Papers*. Although not expressly mentioned in his writings, Mailer apparently regarded Hasidism as a source of mystical inspiration, an alternative to the rationalistic-positivistic worldview that was threatening to undermine the richness of American culture. In the case of the latter a new text exerts its influence in Mailer's work, vestiges of the

American-Jewish anti-hero that in itself had become an established cultural symbol and which had been almost exorcised from his work in favor of the American Adam myth or the non-ethnic Hemingway-Kafka alienated and maimed anti-hero type, a kind of amalgam of Jake Barnes and Joseph K.²² In a very important sense then if the American Adam was the primary myth and motif in Mailer's work, in *Harlot's Ghost*, his most recent work, the *shlemiel* (which also may be a variant of the American Adam) steals its way into his work, adding a new textual variety to an achievement which, while adventurous in its choice of literary forms, has tended to become perhaps fixated on certain themes and figures. Yet with the completion of his latest novel, Mailer finally comes to share, unwittingly perhaps, in the larger tradition of the deepest strata of American culture, in its variegated diversity, in its collection of myths and images from a multitude of different cultures, and in its embrace of the outrageous and the marginal.

²² On Mailer's use of myth and his place in the American canon, see Joseph Wenke's recent study, *Mailer's America* (Hannover: University Press of New England, 1987).